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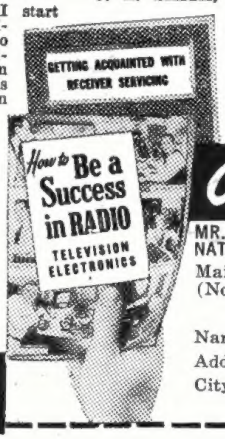

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Carcajou, the terror, roamed the Devil's Graveyard—his knife for the Redcoat spy—his rifle for Uncle Jim—and now his lusting hands to snare a far more alluring victim.

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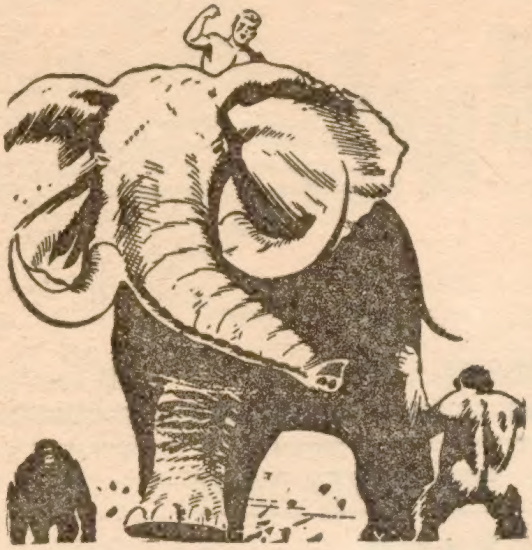

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From the grave came the message that drew city-bred Judith Hoyt unwillingly ever northward . . . through the white-fanged Kanawan, beyond the blizzard-swept Kaskaiou, to the Devil's Graveyard of the Shaganok where a shadowy Carcajou terror awaited his white bride.

SPOILSMEN OF ELDORADO

By JOHN STARR

THE heavy envelope bore the name of the dead, and from the worse than dead came the message inside. Mailed from a port in British Columbia, dated in June, it was addressed in curliqued script to Mrs. Matthew Hoyt. A hatchment of forwardings delivered it, almost three months later, to the executor of Mrs. Hoyt's estate.

The first enclosure, penned in florid hand, read bewilderingly as follows:

Most worthy Madame,

I take the honor to address you in behalf of said Wm. Kingdom, our client. Being of just mind and so empowered I now petition to make known the sum of one thousand dollars gold is hereby paid in account at the Exchange Bank of Seattle to the

favor of you, Mrs. Matthew Hoyt & Daughter.

More amounts will then be added. The treasure is considerable.

Our client, Wm. Kingdom, is not known. He is not to be found and all remains confidential. His desiring of wrongs to repay and a fortune for loved ones to share is the final will and testament. To this I set my hand and seal in greetings.

Louis Marchand
Intendant of Law
Three Waters

The smaller enclosure was a scrap of brown paper, penciled in straggly haste. Close examination was needed to decipher it:

Situation getting desperate. Suspect the truth is known, and advise utmost caution. The stake is bigger than we dreamed, but so is the danger.

Judith Hoyt read through them slowly then looked up in amazement. "But what does it mean?" she demanded. "Is this —these things—what's the importance? Who's William Kingdom? Why all the rush in getting me here?"

"Whoa!" said her uncle. The importance is that I recognize those pencil hen-tracks. They're your father's, Judy—Matt Hoyt's fist if I ever saw it."

She drew a ragged breath. "But he's dead. He was killed in the Pribiloffs years ago. Mother had the notice—"

"She never really believed it though," said Uncle Jim. "I don't know how she let on to you, but she privately thought he arranged that notice himself. It was his way of setting her free."

"Free!" she echoed scornfully.

"I puzzled this over quite a spell," Uncle Jim continued, "and I'm positive it's him. Kingdom's most likely the new name he's taken, and I see this lawyer's roundabout as sure proof he's alive. He's struck it rich, honey, and he wants to make up for all those sorry years."

Emotion forced a sound from her, a mockery of laughter. "Yes," she cried. "Now that mother's suffering is done, now that she's dead—oh, Uncle Jim, how could anything repay her? I don't want his money. It's too late for his love. I never want to think of him again."

"You're all upwrought," Uncle Jim said gently. "Sit down and take it slow. There was a time when I felt your same way. I cussed your daddy high and low, and I even sent him word one time that if he crossed my pistol sight I'd save the law from hanging him. But now I know that he only done what he had to do. He's paid for his sins aplenty, and if I can be of help to him—"

Uncle Jim shook his head. "Your mother never stopped loving him. He's your own bone and blood, Judy; don't forget that. I done a little inquiry before I telegraphed you, and some of my high politician friends nosed out the situation down in Elgin county. Your daddy's trouble was so long ago that a few strings pulled here and there might wipe it off the docket."

She eyed him stubbornly, warily.

"What put me in the rush," he went on, "is the news I had from the Seattle bank. The money's there all right. They know the name of Louis Marchand—he's dealt with 'em before—but there's little they can tell of him. This Three Waters is a backwoods place, too small for maps, but the general neighborhood don't seem to set so deep inside. The season's getting on, of course, but I figgered it out—"

She suddenly saw how his plans were tending, and presentiment was a ghostly hand at her throat. "No!" she cried. "I don't care, I tell you! I've got my school. I've got to be back."

"Your mother was likewise my sister," said Uncle Jim, "and I've tried to think what she'd want done. I could go by myself, I reckon, but the question is would he trust me. It might take more than my persuasion to make him face the world again."

Her thoughts were swirling. There was a shiver in her, a deep unreasonable dread. A flood of protests trembled her lips.

Uncle Jim glanced narrowly at her, glanced quickly away. "Think it over," he advised. "Take a walk outside. Sleep on it tonight. From the way I doped it

we wouldn't have much of a jaunt. We'd go to Seattle and learn what else we could. Then on to salt water and up. They say that plenty kinds of ships ply along the coast."

"I won't go," she said dully. "I can't—"

But from the welter of her thoughts a dark hand reached. It beckoned her, commanding.

II

THE sea mists were thinning, lifting with the dawn, but the voice of the foghorn still moaned its croaking intervals. The little coastal freighter rocked in the landswells, and the sickening motion put a waver in Judith's knees, filled her stomach with butterflies.

Since midnight she had not slept. She had wakened to the foghorn's hoot, lost and lorn, and the dreary hours since had been filled with the slosh of ocean, the creak of timbers, the footsteps of the nightwatch. In the darkness she had wept her silent tears, had sobbed mute prayers, but still her unease persisted.

She stood near the deck house, well wrapped against the morning's damp, and watched the seamen lower the landing boat. Uncle Jim, lean and brown and cheerful, was shaking hands with Captain Slane.

"All ready, honey?" he called. "They got your duffel loaded?"

"I guess so." She said her goodbyes to the captain, to the lantern-jawed mate, and then she was descending to a jiggling cockleshell. Uncle Jim took the seat beside her, voices shouted farewells, the oars dipped into grey-green swells and oozed them ahead into dim-frosted nothingness.

She closed her eyes. She clasped her knees with gloved hands and set her teeth against emotion. Uncle Jim had worries enough of his own without her flightiness added. She mustn't let her composure break, no matter what happened. Her misery must remain her own.

Misery? Yes, that was the word for it. Since their journey started—it seemed like ages ago—her trepidation had grown. It was a nameless fear, intangible, but each slow northward day had hemmed her closer within its shadow. It was an inward woe she felt, rooted deep, bitterly compounded of loneliness and bewilderment.

"Listen!" said Uncle Jim. "The surf—"

The fog was broken now, and between the hazy patches pale sunlight shone. The brightness touched the long swells but did not liven them. The sea retained its solemn face, vastly brooding, and Judith sensed the threat beneath. From ahead, louder now, came a throttled roar, a sullen pound.

"Look—" Her uncle was pointing. "The shore, Judy. It'll perk us both, I reckon, to stretch our legs on good dry land again."

"Yes," she said. She smiled for him, a duty smile, but her searching eyes were moody. She saw the jut of a wharf, a smear of beach beyond. Driftwood scattered, tangles of kelp, nets spread between the shacks that stumbled along a barren shore.

Fish smells, the scent of poverty and decay. Ragtag figures straggled among the flotsam, the clutter of boats, and she turned her head so that Uncle Jim might not see her revulsion. So this, she thought, is the Northland? This is the land, the clean free wilderness, so rich in splendor that they name it God's Country?

The misery shivered inside her. *Go back, go back*—that's what all her instincts cried. She was suddenly aware that they had come on a fool's errand. She and Uncle Jim were too small, too weak, too civilized for the task they faced. This was the primitive, raw and tough, frozen bleak, and suddenly her unreasoned fear of it was tempered with unreasoned hate.

A FISH-SMELLING man directed them to the Mounted Police. The post headquarters was the end of the haphazard street, a sturdy log structure distinguished as much by its neatness as by the flag it flew. On a bench nearby a blank-faced squaw was nursing her papoose. A trio of dogs watched their approach, challenging.

"Mean lookin', ain't they?" said Uncle Jim. "It's the wolf strain, I reckon, gives 'em their snakeyed slant."

There's wolf-strain in the people too, Judith thought. All the land was bred to wildness, to the claw and fang of survival's fight, but Uncle Jim wouldn't notice that. He'd been raised in Montana, in the Teton roughs, and every new sight roused his curiosity, sharpened his enjoyment. He was fifty-four, by his own admission, but mostly he was acting like an awe-struck six-year-old.

They went inside, and a tall man rose from a desk at the rear. "Jim Winslow's my name," said her uncle, "from down in the States. We're just off the *Petrel,* bound in for the Shaganok, and Cap'n Slane said you was the fellow we'd better stop first to see."

"Why, yes, yes. Do sit down." His voice was clipped but pleasant. His hair and trim mustache were grizzled but his pink jaw had a youthful line. He introduced himself as Inspector Holland, happy to be of service. His survey of Judith was an approving one, she noted, and beneath his admiring eye she relaxed a bit.

He glanced through Uncle Jim's credentials nodding, then turned to the map on the wall.

"The Shaganok—was that how you called it?"

Uncle Jim rose for a closer look. His finger trailed inland, stopped with a jerk. "I understood it was right in here."

It seemed to Judith that the Inspector's features hardened momentarily. His eyes —or did she imagine it? were suddenly warily overcast. "Yes, of course—" he said quickly. "Shaganok—yes, the Indian name. Our own designation is a translation, I suppose."

"And what's that?" said Uncle Jim.

Holland shrugged. "There's a mountain face in there that takes on a curious aspect with the snows. Looks like a giant horned skull. Superstition, that sort of thing—they call it the Devil's Graveyard."

His warning note was plain to hear, but Uncle Jim glossed over it with a chuckle. "It beats all get out, don't it," he said, "how Injuns go for fancy names? I was raised next door to a Sioux reservation—"

The inspector listened politely. "Quite," he said, when Uncle Jim had finished. "Now, Mr. Winslow, this business of yours. A mining property, is that correct?"

"Yep," said Uncle Jim. His lie came glibly. "There's some claims I got to inspect. It's a question of looking the layout over before sinking money in the development."

"I see. And how long do you expect to stay?"

"Oh, I dunno. A week—ten days."

The inspector smiled thinly. "I don't mean to be inquisitive. It's a difficult country and our law feels responsibility for—ah—visitors. Sometimes strangers don't understand how big, how wild that interior is. You can't judge our distances by the map, you know. Multiply by five times, ten times, and you'll get a better estimate."

"I ain't exactly a tenderfoot," said Uncle Jim. "I got the money to hire plenty of what we'll need to get us there."

"Of course. I was thinking of the young lady—not the kind of going, I mean to say, that my own daughter would enjoy. You're prepared for weather, I suppose, Miss Winslow?"

"Miss Hoyt," she corrected. "Judith Hoyt."

"We're connected on her mother's side," said Uncle Jim. "What do you mean there, weather? We got another month, ain't we, before real winter sets in?"

"You may have down in the States," the inspector said. "Here on the coast, with the mountains to shield us, we expect to keep comfortable still a while. But inside you never can tell. The storms set their own schedules."

He spread his hands. "Still, it's your affair. I'm short handed today—not even a clerk—but Sergeant Jaynes should be back directly and we'll see what he can arrange."

They went outside to a drizzle of rain. They crossed the ruts of the crooked street, surveyed a line of cheerless buildings.

"You could see he didn't believe you," Judith said.

"Who could?" Uncle Jim demanded "Ain't his man going to help us out?"

"But he doesn't want us to go in there. Something's wrong—I can feel it in my

bones. Why was the Seattle bank so mysterious? Why did they refuse—"

"Soothe down," he said. "As quick as we get to this Three Waters place and find this Louis Marchand we'll know what it's all about. Keep your hair on."

"But we've got to trust *somebody,* Uncle Jim. Why couldn't you ask—"

"What could I ask? It's ticklish business, honey, to talk to the law about a man who's been dodging arrest these sixteen years. For another thing, please remember that note. Something big at stake, plenty danger—we might upset the applecart if we started people prying."

"But what will we do if—"

"Right now," he interrupted, "our smartest move is let's eat."

III

THEY left next morning from the river landing north of town. Sergeant Jaynes, dour and efficient, had deftly steered the arrangements. He had supplied a mission crossbreed—Charley seemed to be his name—as a guide and major-domo. Charley, in turn, had produced a sad-eyed helper who was now stowing gear into a flat-bellied canoe.

"I guess you know your business, Sergeant," said Uncle Jim, "but it looks to me like a halfway jiggle would spill the dang thing. You sure it won't sink when we all climb in?"

Jaynes batted a swarm of midges. "You could carry another hun'red pounds," he said. "Ballast you better, too, through the swifts."

Around the rim of the wooded cove a number of other craft were beached. Pole bateaus and thick-ribbed cargo canoes were aligned near an open loading shed, and scattered figures idled beyond. There was a stir as Inspector Holland appeared, strolling in scarlet majesty. A black-garbed little man—Judith thought for a moment he was a missioner—accompanied him.

"You're wanted at the post, Jaynes," Holland said. He smiled at Judith, and his look was approval of the care expended in arranging her hair. She had braided the coppery strands, pinned them in a circlet effect that made her face more womanly. A sound night's sleep, her qualms lost in weariness, had refreshed her amazingly.

"This is Mr. Hector Bishop," said Holland. "Mr. Winslow from the States, Hector, and his niece."

"Good morning, good morning—"

Bishop's voice was dry and light, faintly burred with Scotland's heather. Beneath his flat-crowned hat were frosty mutton-chops that aged a pallid face. He walked with the aid of a crooked-handled stick, but though his body seemed frail there was strength in his bony wrist, in his thick-fingered hand.

"Hector's the admiral of yonder fleet," the inspector went on. "He scents braw weather ahead and is loading in against it. He's the chief trader, Winslow, in the district that holds your interest."

"I'd have no need for this haul," said Bishop sourly, "if we had a few policemen worth their salt. My people set upon, my storehouse raided, and what satisfaction do I get from you popinjays of the law?"

"Gently, Hector," Holland protested. "That curdled disposition of yours brings on the rheumatism, y'know. Give us a little time, old chap, and we'll cage your Carcajou."

"Time? It's six months gone and can you say you've even made a beginning? Fiddledum! He's the poison that ails your precious Montagnais, I tell you. He'll rouse a band some night, stage a massacre, and then perhaps you'll begin to think to do a little something."

"Don't let him alarm you, Miss Hoyt," the inspector said. "His crustiness, I've found, is chiefly put on. Give Hector his own way and he'll purr like a kitten."

"Hah!" said the little man. He grimaced, but for an instant his eyes forgot their deep blue hardness. They became softly wise, Judith thought, and she read in them wry humor.

"In view of the circumstances," the inspector explained, "Hector thinks you might be better off with one of his couriers at your stern. Our coast Indians do well enough, but Hector's men know the snags and narrows, the easiest portages."

"And moreover," said the little man, "this certain one is a crack shot with his rifle."

UNCLE JIM looked puzzled. "We're much obliged, of course," he said, "but what's all this we're getting into? What's this Carcajou palaver?"

Inspector Holland shrugged. Judith saw the calculation behind his smile, and she knew that this meeting had been arranged for a purpose. This time he put his warning in plainer words.

"It's a name," he said. "Carcajou, the wolverine. We've had various troubles inland and Carcajou is the rumor behind them. We're still trying to determine how much of him is human agency and how much is the usual blather of werewolf and windigo."

"It's past the blather stage, Inspector," Hector Bishop said grimly. "You can call it what you like, but if you heard the men in my store—"

"I know, I know," Holland interjected. "The situation is bad. Our difficulty is that we can't see where to begin. One witness swears to evil spirits, another to a ten-foot giant. Everybody accuses the other fellow. A raiding band descends on your post and you see the shape of Carcajou among the Montagnais. The Montagnais, on the other hand, assert that their village sleeps in dread of Carcajou."

"Just a minute," said Uncle Jim. He touched Judith's shoulder reassuringly. "How does all this fit in with us? You mean we'd better watch our topknots?"

"Not exactly, no," Holland said. "Since I talked to Hector last night, however, I've been thinking the matter out. Just how urgent is this trip of yours, Mr. Winslow? Couldn't it wait another week?"

"It could," Uncle Jim admitted. "We've come a long ways to get here, though, and I'm anxious to get finished up."

"Or perhaps you might go in with Hector's party. He'll be loading tomorrow, and his route passes close to Three Waters. Matter of fact, he might be the man to advise you on your business deal. He knows the country, knows the people, used to be a mining man himself in his younger day."

"Yeah," said Uncle Jim cautiously, "I expect he could. This friend we got to see though, asked to keep it confidential."

Hector Bishop turned a leaf with the ferrule of his cane. "I had no mind to interfere, Mr. Winslow. You know your own plans. If Three Waters is your destination there's hardly cause for alarm. It's open trail between here and there, and most of our mischief has been confined beyond it. The chief reason I offered one of my men—"

"I take it mighty neighborly," said Uncle Jim. "We're real obliged."

"Not at all. If your interest should stretch into my neck of the woods, my post is near North Traverse."

Inspector Holland drew Judith aside. "Good luck, Miss Hoyt. Bon voyage all that. I'm sure Three Waters will make you welcome. If you'll hand this little message to our outpost there—"

He was extending an envelope.

"Our fellow in charge—he has harebrained notions occasionally but I think you'll find him trustworthy. He's—ah—a devilish young brother of mine."

HECTOR BISHOP and the inspector trudged back to town together. "Sometimes, Hector," Holland said, "I'd like to be a younger man. A beauty, wasn't she?"

"She was indeed," said the trader thoughtfully. "She'll need some fiber to go with it, though. That inside country wasn't made for the ornamental kind, and half an eye could see she was frightened as a bird."

"I know. I've sent young Sandy specific instructions to keep them under his wing."

The little man eyed him keenly. "Inspector," he said, "I'll tell you again. What you should have sent him is a dozen capable men. What can he do, little more than a boy, in this devil's situation? The Graveyard covers too many miles, and there's too much hell in it. We've had other strangers poking in within the last six weeks, and what are they up to anyway?"

Holland hesitated. He started to speak, stopped with a frown. "You've known me a long time, Hector," he said after a moment. "Please take my word that we'll do what we can as soon as we can."

"I'll take it willingly," said the trader. "I'm afraid that some of my people, though, would prefer one deed to a million words. They're traveling the traplines in pairs, shooting at any move in the brush. I've calmed them down a little by building my raided storehouse over into a kind of barracks for some of the outlying families, but unless something definite is done—"

"Of course, of course! And we'll do it, given time. Barracks, eh? Excellent notion. Keep 'em safe until things are in hand."

"If things keep up," said Bishop gravely, "my job will be to keep 'em from taking the matter in hand themselves. Men can't live with a sword dangling overhead. Four dozen rifles and ammunition, as well as the supplies, were stolen in that raid on North Traverse. I can't prove that the thieves were Montagnais, but there isn't a man on the Upper Lakes who doubts that those rifles are hidden away in the caves of Skull Mountain."

"Yes, yes—we've gone through that before. If you'll only have patience—"

Bishop chuckled. "Patience? It's my strongest suit! But I'll tell you fair that I'm loading back a fresh supply of cartridges in case of emergency."

They walked on, briefly silent.

"The American, the uncle—" Bishop said presently. "He seemed all right, had a good straightforward look, and I hope his so-called friend doesn't sell him a hole in the ground. The only mineral operations that I know around Three Waters are pannings from some of the worked-over creeks and a few diggings."

"Yes, it does sound fishy. It's particularly curious that the girl has to go along. I hoped we could throw up scare enough to persuade him to leave her behind."

"The wife of the Frenchman from Lake Larue—"

The little trader counted on his fingers. "Next Spurlock's girl, and Dan Jordan's wife escape—"

The inspector nodded grimly. "I'm glad they've got your man along. The one sure fact we know of Carcajou, whatever Carcajou may be, is that he's as keen for the ladies as he is for bloody murder."

IV

THE canoe's steady lift against the current, the slow parade between overgrown banks—these were Judith's impressions of the morning's journey. The air warmed with the climb of sun and they sought scrub shade for the noonday halt. The afternoon saw the stream narrow. Rocks grew craggier, trees stretched taller, silence settled deeper around. There were shallows that the oarsmen waded, and finally a portage detour through a shag-walled gut. They camped in a glade where lean-to-shelters, the scars of old fires, marked an accustomed stopover.

"What was tough about that, honey?" said Uncle Jim. "It'll make hardly any trip at all unless there's worse ahead. What about it, Charley? How do we go from here?"

The crossbreed's mission English was sketchy but pointed. "Next time up and down," he said, and his moving hands outlined a snaketrack. "Go easy by water, go hard over Cancan. Too much splash go too quick."

"Means rapids, I guess," said Uncle Jim. He unfolded his government map. "Yep, here we are. Kanawan Pass is how it's spelled, kind of dodging this hump of mountain. You tired, honey?"

"No," she said. "I feel fine."

She did feel better. The sundown hour was clean and fresh, the woodlands splashed with deep-toned afterglow. There was ease and peace in the quiet, and the thought of sleep was sweet.

But when they had eaten, when the swift-falling night had swallowed all beyond the fire's splash, sleep was slow to come. A mattress of twigs was soft support for her sleeping bag, her eyes were heavy lidded and her body relaxed, but a star's wink peeked through the lean-to roof and kept her thoughts awake.

She thought of California, of home, of the eager faces of the youngsters she taught in that schoolroom far away. She thought of a sleepy town in the sunny hills, the orchard rows and neat-patterned fields, and of the young ranchers who hitched their horses to the picket fence outside the schoolma'am's boarding house.

She thought of laughter on the vine-cooled porch, songs and a gay guitar, of friendliness she had abandoned.

The base of her misery, she recognized it now, was the fear that she'd never go home again. There was a dream she had, recurring, in which she saw this Northland as a gaunt and barren island that rose in windswept silver and blue from a rage-tossed sea. A twilight shimmer surrounded it, a gossamer curtain that Judith Hoyt parted. The hazy folds swirled out, enveloped her, and through them she ran weeping, lost forever.

"What is it, honey?" said Uncle Jim. "Did I hear you squeak."

"No—" she said breathlessly. "I didn't say a thing."

He went back to the firelight, and she heard the mumble of his voice that endlessly questioned Charley and Hector Bishop's hooknosed courier. Judith closed her eyes again and thought of her father. She tried to picture his face but her childhod memories were too thin. She was four when she saw him last, and now she was twenty. Sixteen blank years in between, and all that time he had been no more than a sorrow brooding in her mother's eyes, a reminder of flight and sorrow's shame.

And now—when the past had buried him, why couldn't he stay among the dead?

MATTHEW DAVID HOYT was his name. A doctor by profession, and from all accounts a talented one. Deft hands for healing, a brilliant mind, but a man of moods, of restless spirit. Ambition rode him, and the rut of a doctor's routine could not contain his energies. He branched into politics, into dubious get-rich schemes, and there he met his downfall. He had a firebrand's temper, a reckless fist, and one night a noted politician was killed, a shady woman shot, a disreputable house set afire in the course of a knockdown brawl.

Uncle Jim knew the ugly details. A four-year-old knew only that suddenly her daddy was gone, her mother lay ill for days in a darkened room, and that soon thereafter they moved to a distant town. It was one of a dozens towns that housed them before time would fade the scandal.

Through the growing years there had been occasional reminders. One Christmas brought a China shawl, a silken slant-eyed doll. A letter with a Russian stamp contained a sum of money. A secretive man in a sailor's jacket came to call one day, and that evening a gray-lipped mother told Judith that her father was dead.

And why should he now, years after, come back from the grave? They had been happy without him. They had found their own content. It was a mother's work that had cared for Judith Hoyt, educated her, fitted her to face the world when her mother passed away. What duty did she owe, what respect, to a man who had never been more in her life than a shadow of woe, a shame forgotten?

They said she favored her father. She was tall, strongly boned, lean-muscled with strength. Her copper-red hair was the Hoyt flag of temper and high-horse pride, but that was an outward sign. Inwardly she was the Winslow breed, her mother's gentle spirit. Happiness was her ambition —a life of order, of simple work, of friends and kindness.

And just as she was reaching for it her father's ghost had risen to destroy the pattern again. Back in Pala, in the humdrum of day to day, the sadness of her mother's death was fading. She was beginning to be gay again, to enjoy the dances and fiestas, when Uncle Jim summoned her with the nightmare message.

The words of the summoning letter paraded fantastically. *Wrongs to repay, a fortune to share . . . . The final will and testament. . . . Situation desperate—utmost caution—the stake, the danger . . . .*

They pounded a drumbeat that softened and slackened and finally merged with the drone of her uncle's voice from the fireside. She closed her eyes and slept.

SHE awoke refreshed. The pale of dawn found them moving again, and that was the day when she learned how much punishment her body could stand.

The early stages were deceptive. A cleared trail led down the slope from

camp. A mile of carry embarked them on a splintery lake. Then a swampy haul to a second lake, and watery distance flowed. They skirted a forest parade of green patched here with gold and there with scarlet.

Occasionally, the vista showed the stepstone heights of land beyond, the jut of a cloudy spire, but the overpowering sense of the barrier was hidden until they veered into a feedline stream that dodged through a channel of overhang and finally washed them into a bare expanse of chaos.

"Good land of Goshen!" said Uncle Jim.

Judith stared. The boulders stretched ahead, bleak acres of them, and behind the sheer cliff walls rose terrifying. In the shadow of this massive steep, the ledges like crude mounts to heaven, she was shrunken small with wonder.

"Do you mean we have to *climb?*"

Sloe-eyed Charley grinned. He was a scarecrow in white man's castoffs, but Judith liked him better than Hector Bishop's dark and silent courier. "Pretty soon see," he said. "Cancan cut over, water go big." He darted his hands, waggled his head, muttered expressive swishings.

The bulk of the gear was lashed into the canoe that the Indians shouldered, but Judith insisted on strapping a pack of her own. She would learn, in the next dozen miles, how burdensome the smallest pack would grow. She would learn how rocks could bite through leather, how slippery ledges could strain at muscles hitherto unknown. She would learn how slow and arduous a half-mile plod could be, and how blinding swift other miles could speed through the moaning, lashing Kanawan.

That torrent of water was a terror she could never have faced if she had known. The entrance to the pass was a straggling ravine, and here the stream was a brownish two-foot trickle. They hauled a bumpy trail along its windings, now on one side and now on the other, and there must have been underground springs, blind mountain freshets that fed its flow. Once, when the passage thinned to a shag-walled defile, they waded its bed for a slanting hundred yards. In the treacherous footing Judith stumbled. The water had a stinging chill, and when she recovered she clasped a badly scraped wrist.

"You hurt, Judy?" Uncle Jim's voice echoed hollowly back.

"No, no—I'm coming." But as she came she wrapped and knotted a handkerchief over a patch of flesh raked raw.

She lost all track of time a little later. It was stop and rest, then plod aagin. It was shadow and sunshine and wheezing a tune with her breath. At the noonday halt she could not eat. She sipped tasteless tea, too fagged to rouse to Charley's assertion that the worst was behind. He pointed to the notch of bluffs ahead.

"Come easy now," he said. "Go quick."

The water spilled a ten-foot fall into a scrub-sloped valley, and the lower stream seemed as placid as any pasture creek. She didn't notice the extra care that Charley gave to lashing down the gear. She took her place in the canoe, and it didn't seem unusual that Uncle Jim knelt forward of the center brace with a paddle. Hector Bishop's courier launched them with a shout, and they moved up in a glide that was restful, lulling.

Judith sighed. She flexed aching muscles, relaxing. Half-eyed fatigue blanked her thoughts, drugged her sense.

She did not know how long her waking trance endured. One instant she was floating soft eternity, a shining hush, and next instant she roused to shock, to smothering sensation. She stared, she gasped, and the panic swept her.

The placid stream was gone. The gentle valley had become a rockbound chasm The canoe was speeding a glassy black surface, pushed faster and faster in awful impetus, launching straight toward a sheer gray wall ahead with spuming white jaws at the base of it.

FROZEN tension commanded the canoe. Charley crouched moveless in the prow, Uncle Jim was a back-bowed statue with paddle poised, and Judith's cry was stilled in her throat by the rushing loom of disaster. She could hear a distant drumming, a growing murmur, and the darting canoe seemed to throb with the pulse of it. The dark waters, thick as

oil, were suddenly twisted by underflow into ridges that would lift and bash them full against the cliffside's white-fanged maw.

"Hai-yah—!"

Hector Bishop's courier shrilled his defiance above the yammer-din they charged. His stern paddle bit and the slithering craft jerked to a hawing rein. The prow leaped, shuddering, and they rode the slant of a hogback bulge that flirted them past the wall of doom, past the suction roils that flanked it, and hurled them into an unseen entrance, smoked with spray, that was a gateway to a roaring white inferno.

It was the gorge of the Kanawan, and its rocks had gnawed the bones of many a boat, its boil was a blind embrace that had swallowed many a good, brave man. A thin, black ribbon, broken now and then in foamy fountain licks, was the channel of safety that zigzagged through a thundering, lashing, bubbling millrace flood that stunned imagination.

It was Nature in frenzy, the primitive elements of earth combined in maniac furor. Its chant of sounds was so deafening mad, its shutter of sights so vastly cruel, the human comprehensions were dead and lost in them.

They hurtled into delirium, and the terror was so overwhelming that Judith's mind could not contain it. Somewhere in the frantic moil her blindfold fears were ripped away. Life flowed in her veins again, a vibrant chord sang out defiance. There was part of her that dully knew no skill could steer them through, no luck could save them, but there was some deep instinct, too, that saw a glory glow beyond the danger, that recognized the beauty in Death's stark majesty.

She did not know that she was shouting. She was part of the blurring speed that bore them, part of the primal force that spat at jag-toothed spurs and chuckled through the boulders, that snarled the ledges of the gorge and writhed the bottom beneath them.

She breathed to the buck of the fat canoe. She swayed to the paddle-slash of Hector Bishop's courier that swerved them through a gauntlet of knife-edge juts and cauldron simmers. She yelled with the poke of Charley's blade that fended them from a blubbering crotch of boulders. She was wet, soaked through with the slosh that Uncle Jim was bailing now, but die-hard daring didn't care.

There was one last flurry that shot them up the crest of a flume, plummeted them into a washboard rough. The canoe frame shivered, and it seemed that each bumpy forward lunge would knife them through the billow ahead. They all were shouting, and abruptly their voices rang above the water's roar. The canoe spewed into a wider, deeper current and the fury dwindled behind. They glided into a backwater eddy, a pool of peace, where trees fringed a sandy shore.

"Hai!" Charley brandished his paddle. "Get dry now. Cancan lake all easy. Next day by now we're at Three Waters sure."

V

SUNDOWN found them camped on a lakeside shingle. When they had eaten they lounged in comfort, watching the evening creep in orange and purple motley across the mirrored bayous. The air was still and leaping trout slapped liquid echoes. The Kanawan gorge was a dozen winding miles away, but now and then Judith had the impression that its roary mumble still pounded her eardrums.

She was dog-tired. Her joints were sore, her muscles twinged, her throat so strained that she spoke in a whisper. It was torture to squat beside the lake and bathe her gashed wrist, but she washed out the handkerchief bandage and replaced it with a fresh one. When she returned to the fire Uncle Jim was in the process of taking Hector Bishop's courier down a peg.

There had been hazy minutes of exhaustion when they came to welcome landing at the end of the rapids. Judith had struggled from the canoe, managed a couple of strides, then collapsed in a shaky heap. Uncle Jim was little better, walking on limber legs to a tree's support and relieving himself with violent retching. He hadn't liked the patronizing way that the hook-nosed redskin had acted thereafter.

The courier was greasing his rifle now,

and Uncle Jim saw his chance. He indicated the gun.

"I hear you're pretty handy with that," he said. "You shoot good—no miss, huh?"

The dark man shrugged, spluttered, and Charley translated. "Ver' good to shoot. Shoot wolf, bear, moose. His name mean Strong Hunter."

"It does, huh?" Uncle Jim looked at the sky. "I used to be a fair shot myself, and I thought we might waste a cat'ridge or two before it gets too dusky. Take that can there, Charley, and give it a toss. Let's see him wing it."

The courier was agreeable. He took his stance, snugged stock to shoulder, lifted the barrel with the swing of Charley's arm.

The blast of explosion kicked the arcing can.

Judith knew Uncle Jim's old tricks. She was ready for the *wham-wham-wham* of revolver shots that followed. The can struck the ground and Uncle Jim's pistol barked twice again. Clinking tin danced, and as the startled Indians turned the Colt's .38 was sliding back into its underarm holster.

"Count the holes," said Uncle Jim.

Charley counted in pantomine—five, six. The dark courier clasped rifle to chest and peered at Uncle Jim with empty-eyed awe.

"Was a time," said Uncle Jim, "when I could've put all five in it before it hit the ground. But I guess that none of us ever are the same men we used to be."

THE incident was unimportant, a show-off splurge that was typical of Uncle Jim, yet it set the stage for the visitation that came with the sooty shadows of the hour before dawn. Those echo-rolling detonations, Judith thought, had called to danger across the miles and summoned it upon them.

Sleep was a stupor that claimed her early, a boundless void into which her being sank. She awoke to utter darkness, to vacant hush, and her first sensation was the cold. The night had charged the air with chilling nip, and perhaps the change had roused her,

Or was it a fizz of sound, a new scent hovering?

Sight was useless in the gloom, but in a moment a spark gleamed from the campfire site, a tongue of flame leaped with a sputter, and she could discern a waft of smoke arising.

Someone had replenished the embers, that was it. Charley and the courier were vague sleeping shapes beyond the flitter of light, and the purr of Uncle Jim's slumber was assurance close at hand. She closed her eyes, stretched muscles and sinews that would wake to sharper discomfort with the day.

Uncle Jim . . . .

Her drowsy thoughts remembered a time when a pigtailed child sat on his knee. His hair had been thickly brown then, his mustache trim and debonair, but otherwise he had not altered. His easy voice and kindly ways, his generosity—yes, the Lord had made him in a special mold He had for special mankind.

At fifty-four Jim Winslow was still a frisky youngster. His shooting exhibition today was a throwback to his cowboy past, to the hooraw of the fenceless range that would always possess him. His urge to adventure, Judith knew, was the mainspring that had launched them on this will-o'-wisp trail. His eyes were always seeking for rainbow gold beyond the next horizon.

Some day, perhaps, she would learn his zest for living. Maybe he could show her the cure for the lack she sensed in herself. She had lived so long, all her growing years, in her mother's world of meekness and patience, the woman's lot. A home to keep, a job to do, neatness and order and calm—these had been the laws she lived by.

But today she had felt new stirrings. The strength of the wild had called out to her strength. Danger's voices had chanted mad music, and beyond her terror she had seen a vision. She had thrilled to new emotions.

What was that? Was it a rustle, a move of air, the feel of a watchful presence? In her nostrils was a curious waft, but the turn of her head saw nothingness beyond the fireglow.

Imagination. The hobgoblins of her fears again . . . . She settled back, and now she could begin to see what a fool she had been. Those nightmare frights, those shadow dreams were ghosts of her own creation, and a single pinch of courage could banish them. She was young and strong, and all she needed was confidence. She'd show Uncle Jim—

Wait—

She lay breathless. Her heart skipped and her body was lifeless. Soundlessly, magically the presence loomed. A blot in the night, a blur, and then it became the towering shape of a man.

The musky scent was strong now—an animal odor, a stench, that was warm and alive and pervading. She had the dim impression of size, a brute-man face, a satanic savagery. He stood motionless, brooding, and then a hand was creeping. A clawing hand, a flick of white—

She screamed.

She rolled toward the fire, screaming, and the camp sprang awake. Shouts, the fire flaming, and Uncle Jim's revolver challenging the gloom. Charley had a ready knife, the courier's rifle was loaded to kill, but the shadow quarry had vanished in the shadows.

NOR did the dawn of morning reveal any further sign. Search could find no track of suspicion upon the brown-needled expanse of the campsite. Uncle Jim expressed the general thought as the canoe proceeded along the misty surface of the lake.

"Maybe you dreamed it honey. That jawbone stuff that Inspector Holland put out—you got to thinking of that."

"No, I didn't. I've forgotten what he said. How did fresh branches get on the fire unless somebody put them there?"

"But I mean to say—well, why would a prowler do a stunt like that. Did he want to be seen and maybe shot? What was he after?"

She shrugged. "Maybe I walked in my sleep and fed the fire," she said. "Maybe I stole my own handkerchief from the bush where I had spread it out to dry."

"It's doggone funny, anyhow. What was that smell you smelled again? What did it look like?"

She repeated the vague description. "I'm not being hysterical, Uncle Jim," she added. "I promised myself last night that I wouldn't be a coward any more. I tell you again, though, that it wasn't an owl in the tree. A man was standing over me."

They went on beneath a cloud-patched sky. The sun shone at intervals but a freshening wind robbed the day of warmth. Blustery squalls roughed the water. Treetops tossed to the threat of storm. The paddles raced, churning the miles behind, and swift hours brought them to the edge of the muskeg bottoms, to a flattened vista of brush and scrub, hillock clumps of green that dotted a gray-brown marshland. Here occurred the second act in the morning's mystery.

It was a brief encounter, a double-barrelled surprise. The canoe rounded a brushy point where the arm of the lake seeped into a maze of waterways, and the nicker of his horse announced the stranger. He was scarcely thirty feet away, and even as they stared his rifle was swinging up.

He sat tall in the saddle of a hammer-head bay. He was young, Judith thought, though the collar of his blanket coat concealed his lower features and made the judgment doubtful. He was hatless, and the shaggy pile of his pale hair gave his face a proud look, leonine.

"Hi, there!" hailed Uncle Jim.

Steady eyes surveyed them. A sullen mouth jerked. For an instant his glance rested upon Judith, then his hand moved in sweeping gesture, forbidding. His horse was wheeling simultaneously, and with a thrash of brush they disappeared into the windswept cover.

"Well I'll be jiggered!" Uncle Jim drew an empty hand from inside his coat, "Who was that? What was wrong with him? He seemed like trying to warn us back?"

Hector Bishop's courier was muttering, but his words gave no explanation. He was chanting the spells, Charley told them, against the Wind Devils.

Uncle Jim turned to Judith. "What

about it, honey? Could he have been—"

"No," she said quickly. "It was a darker face. The hair was black, I think."

"You sure? Things look funny, remember, to a scared eye in the dark."

"I—no, I'm sure it wasn't the same. This man on the horse was—"

"Yeah, go on."

"He was different," she said. She held his picture in her mind as they proceeded. The wind increased, and as the rain began to fall she pondered how his face would appear with a brown stain upon it, with the pale hair blacked. It was a puzzle that engrossed her throughout the downpour that splashed them through the last few miles into Three Waters Town.

VI

THEY arrived in weeping afternoon. The town, through the rainpelt, was a lifeless huddle of huts. Bishop's Indian led them to a structure larger than the rest, and Uncle Jim opened the door upon a long room, a disarray of stores, a vast bulk of man beside an iron stove. He heaved himself up, a mountain of fat, and it was almost ludicrous to hear his piping squeak of voice. He welcomed them with many words—Jared Beedle was his name, he was from the States himself, Dakota born, and he had a shakedown right next door that would keep them warm and comfortable.

He uttered a jabberwocky screech, and from the dusky rear two women appeared. He rattled orders and the bulky squaw waddled off to obey. The other woman lounged forward.

"Whiskey," Beedle said to her. "My special keg. Whiskey sops the wet from your marrow. Nothin' like whiskey a day like today. Which way you come in, Mr. —uh—was it Winslow what you said? I knew a man by that name once from—lemme see—it was somewhere in Nebraska. Blacksmith and horse trader, but I don't suppose you're any kin."

Uncle Jim gave him careless replies. The woman served them in battered tincups, then posted herself by the stove to stare openly at Judith. She was young and slender, darkly pretty, a trifle overdressed. Liquid eyes indicated the mixed blood in her.

"You will stay here?" Minutes had passed before she spoke.

"No," said Judith. "Just a little while. My uncle's business won't take long."

"The cold is bad," said the girl. "The houses are poor. You would not like it later."

"Where's your manners, 'Chita?" Beedle piped. "Fix the lady a cup of tea. Help her dry herself there."

The girl turned with feline grace. She glared at him, painted lips curling. "You—" she breathed, and the unspoken words were uglier than curses. She went to the curtained doorway at the rear and did not return again.

"My daughter," Beedle said. He chuckled monstrously. "I don't know where she gets her temper."

The cabin was leaky, dingy and bare, but the warmth of the fire was comforting. Beedle's squaw brought a kettle of water and the combination of tea and dry clothes gave Judith almost a sense of luxury.

"I think the rain is slackening," she said. "The outside looks a little brighter."

Uncle Jim was filling his pipe. He grinned fondly, winking. "Perking up, ain't you? I'm glad to see it, honey. I took a lot on my shoulders, dragging you into here, and I admit that a couple of times I cussed myself for the biggest fool in creation. That business at camp, scaring you that way."

"Next time," she said, "I won't roll away and scream. I'll grab and hold it."

He laughed. "I knew, by golly, you had it in you. It'll take us five days back, they say—considerable rock to climb—but I—"

"What of it?" she said. "We'll tend to that when we've finished here. What's the next move?"

"Marchand—Louis Marchand. I didn't inquire of our storeman friend—can't be sure of his mouthy kind—but he shouldn't be hard to find in this size town. You feel like a little look-see?"

"I'll take my note along," she said, "for Inspector Holland's brother."

THE sky was clearing in the east, and the rain had thinned to a drizzle. Three Waters town, seen now, was expanded to thirty structures. A dozen log buildings, mostly alike in squat squareness, lined a wandering thoroughfare. They plodded a muddy brink.

Smoke came from various chimneys, but the habitants stayed housed against the rain. Their first encounter was a spindling boy with a load of cut wood on a sledge.

"Which way's the hangout of the Mounted Police, son?" said Uncle Jim.

A thumb indicated straight ahead.

"Is it close to Marchand's—Louis Marchand?"

No, said a wagging head. A nod pointed out the structure across the way.

No smoke from the chimney, Judith noted.

The place was old, and a storm had felled one timber of the narrow porch that fronted it.

At the peak of the roof was a lopsided nailment of boards—could they once have formed a cross?

A growl greeted their approach. A malemute dog, fawn and white, raised himself before the door.

As Uncle Jim hesitated the door of the next cabin opened. A lanky man came into view.

"Something ye wanted?"

"Why, yeah. I'm looking for Marchand."

"He ain't there, mister. Been gone all week."

"You know when he's expected back?"

"Nossir, I don't. No tellin' when he comes or goes. You might ask the girl at Beedle's store. She'd be apt to know if anybody."

"That's curious," said Uncle Jim as they moved on. "The girl at Beedle's, huh? Quite a looker, wasn't she? Well, I reckon we may as well go up and make ourselves known to the lawman. It's the customary thing, they tell me."

They found Corporal Roderick Holland with his boots cocked on a table, his interest immersed in a copy of *Sketch*. He sprang up hastily at their entrance, flinging the paper aside—a fair-skinned, leggy youngster, his features lean and attractive, as British as a sovereign.

"I beg your pardon!" He was actually blushing.

Uncle Jim made the introductions. Judith presented the inspector's note, and with a murmured apology he opened it. He read briefly, flushed again, hastily thrust the message aside. Judith had been prepared in advance to like him, and her first impressions confirmed the expectation.

It was plain to be seen, as well, that Corporal Holland shared his brother's appreciation of an attractive woman. Any girl likes to be admired, and Judith blossomed in his contagious friendliness. Who said that Englishmen were aloof, austere, politely frigid?

They discussed the trip, the weather, the country, the primitive accommodations Three Waters offered.

He apologized for the cramped and drafty official quarters. A fire had gutted the original post and this makeshift would have to serve until they could find the labor to rebuild. With Sergeant Hoke on sick leave he was overswamped in details, but if he could be of any service—

"Thanks anyhow," said Uncle Jim, "but we're practically all set. I got a business deal with your lawyer here, but it shouldn't take long to settle the terms once he gets back to town. We just stopped by his house, and the next door fellow said—"

"Lawyer? Who do you mean?"

"Marchand's the name—Louis Marchand. He's been gone a week, this fellow said, but the girl at Beedle's can post us on him."

"Marchand? Been gone a week?" For an instant they saw stress beneath his easy manner, his policeman's pose. "Oh, yes—yes, I see. Fellow next door must have thought you meant the young chap, Louis' ward. Quite a few call him Marchand, I believe, though his rightful name is Lomax."

"I don't quite get you," said Uncle Jim. "How's that again?"

"He wouldn't think you'd be asking for the old boy, of course," said Holland. "Old Louis—it's almost two months now since he was murdered."

VII

THEY killed the old man one sweltering night when the moon was blind. Persons unknown, at least two by the evidence, had entered his house and nabbed him. The gag in his mouth, the bonds that lashed him to a chair, explained why the neighbors heard no alarm, no outcry. They tortured him first—God spare the gruesome details—and then a maniac fury finished him. His face and body bore thirty grievous wounds where a random blade had skewered.

"I don't think I could eat," Judith said. "I'm just not hungry."

"Me neither," said Uncle Jim. "This is a turn I never expected."

They were back in Beedle's cabin, and wavering candles lit the dark. A cold wind had succeeded the rain, gusting mournfully under the door and rattling the boarded window.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"That's what I'm trying to figure. It looks like we stepped into something deeper than I bargained for. My chief worry—" His glance was eloquent.

"You mean me, Uncle Jim? You think I'd better go back to the coast?"

"That'd be safest. This may take some little while, and with the weather on the change—that police inspector could probably arrange to start you home again. If anything happened to you, Judy, I—I don't know what I'd do."

"Are *you* going back?" she demanded. She went to the pile of their trail equipment, turned to show him a snub-nosed revolver. "I found this in your duffle bag. You can show me how to use it. I can protect myself—I can help *somehow.*"

"But listen, honey—"

"I can't quit now," she said tensely. "You said we'd be partners, and I'm holding you to your word. There's a feeling—I can't explain—but I've got to stick to the finish, to see it through."

"You feel for your father, is that how you mean?"

"No—no, I—not that. He's still no more than a stranger to me. It's a feeling of something new, something growing, as if I were finding myself. It's a sense of doing things instead of having them done, of facing problems instead of hiding. If you send me back—"

"Yeah, yeah—" He nodded slowly. "My mistake, it appears, was not paying heed enough to that scrawl in your father's hand. I counted it as some kind of dodge to put a curb on our tongues, a backhand identification for William Kingdon. In the light of the present setup, though—"

"The one sure thing," Judith interrupted, "is that we've got to find somebody we can trust. We can't make another step until we've explained ourselves to someone who knows the situation here."

"Bull's-eye," he said. "I was thinking of that limpy man—that little Hector Bishop. He's sharp and wideawake and he seemed to be friendly. He runs his cargoes through by a westerly route, so I hear, but he'll be passing close within a day or so."

"But we haven't time to waste. Why not corporal Holland?"

"Nice looking boy, ain't he? You two seemed to cotton right from the start. But don't forget, honey, he's still the red-jacket law."

"What if he *is?*" she said. "You can see that he's honest and understanding. He—I know he'd want to help. If you're so sure you can pull your political strings—"

"I wasn't thinking so much of the past," he said. "We can handle the old indictment, I guess, when the right time comes, but there might be local complications. Carcajou — Indian raids — murders — and your daddy suddenly come into some big stake of gold. Sixteen years of on the dodge might do queer things to any man."

"You mean that he might be a thief, a killer?"

"I don't say so, no. The Matt Hoyt I used to know was fair and square, so downright honest he leaned backwards. The thing is, though, we can't be sure. We're only guessing he's this William Kingdom. It's all such a pig-in-a-poke, Judy."

"I don't care," she said. "If he has turned wrong—"

Uncle Jim was on his feet. He stood for a listening moment, then quietly

moved to the door. The candles blinked in the draft as he peered forth into the gloom.

"The wind, I reckon," he said. He returned his Colt's to its shoulder sheath and shut the door again.

IN Beedle's store the tincups were passing.

A fiddle was playing and voices raggled a song. The wind was the only life in the nearby outer dark until, in a moment, a shadow detached itself from the blot of the cabin. It was a flitting shadow, noiseless, that sidled across to the wall of the store. A hand brushed the rough logs, moving rearward, and now the door of the storeman's living quarters winked a wedge of light.

The breed girl, 'Chita, threw her shawl at a moosehead rack. The thick-bodied squaw grunted a question that her daughter refused to acknowledge with even a glance. She went to the mirror beside the bracket lamp and smoothed the flow of her shining hair, stroked the scarlet of pouting lips Her dress was sleazy black, and now her hands preened the uplift curve of her breasts, the slender lines of fluid hips.

The men who lounged near the whiskey barrels greeted her with a welcome mutter, but she briefly held aloof. She waited until Jared Beedle's lazy-lidded glance had searched her face and read her bright-eyed message.

And so it came about, much later, that Jared Beedle aroused himself from the mammoth armchair, rebuilt by his own hand for his particular comfort, in which he customarily slept. This was the doldrum hours of morning, black as pitch, but the fat man needed no guiding light. He had a cat's sight in the dark, he boasted, and he proved the boast as he collected various items from his store shelves.

Tobacco and supplies. Cartridges and a demijohn of his cheapest, rawest whiskey. He bundled them up, and with creditable stealth for any man he padded outside to a storage shed that sided the woodpile clutter behind his dwelling. He waited, shifting from foot to foot in elephant sway, and for almost an hour the faint wheeze of his breath was a core of absolute silence.

Then a tiny clatter. A chip of wood skittered down the shed roof. In a moment, as Beedle was striking a match, came an animal cry, a sort of throaty whine. Beedle's bulgy lips twitched nervously. He raised the lighted match so that the hand-cupped flame illuminated his face, and almost instantly his puff of breath extinguished it. There was no slightest sound of approach, but soon he scented—

Jared Belle was not a finicky man, but he snorted in disgust.

The odor was heavy, unclean, a charnel musk of scavenger hogs or worse. Beedle narrowed his eyes to peer at the indistinct shape that halted just barely beyond arm's reach.

"I told you not to use that call," he whispered. "Save it, and save your filthy stink, for your damned scary Indians."

A grunt. "There's your grub as usual," Beedle said, his voice a murmur. "What I stayed awake to tell you was that strangers are in town. A man from the States, a girl—they may be nosing into trouble. Their first move was to ask for Louis Marchand. They called on the police. 'Chita couldn't overhear quite all they said, but she heard them mention murder and William Kingdom."

The sound that replied might have been throaty laughter.

"You'd better keep watch," Beedle said. "I'm not giving orders, understand, but it would be bad if anybody more poked into the Graveyard now. The payoff's too close to take chances."

Again the heave of Beedle's breath became the pulse of a lingering hush. The vague shape of the newcomer had no human form in the shed's blackout and the storeman was a hulking sculpture in abysmal ebony.

"Be careful," Beedle breathed, at length. "This Winslow—his boatmen say he's a pistol-shooting wizard. Don't bother them, don't get near them, as long as they stay close to town. If nothing happens tomorrow—well, you know where to go for further orders."

A few minutes later he returned to his

house. His nightbound instinct unerringly found his favorite jug on a storeroom shelf, and he babied it to his paunch as he creaked into his armchair. He would not sleep. The morning would find him still sitting there, a hog-jowled sphinx. The pinkish tinge of his fat-squeezed eyeballs would be the only token to show how much of the jug he had emptied.

He tilted the jug, drank deep. He drank again, sighing. Then, as if the dark had eyes, he smuggled something from beneath his belt. He held it tightly, stroking its smoothness. He pressed it preciously between his massive hands. Again and again his touch traced the small disc, the worn shape like a many-legged spider or a crude representation of the sun.

So old, so heavy, so smooth with use. . . . Such a little thing to die for . . .

VIII

IT was a leaden morning. At ten o'clock the frost rime still bleached the bottoms and skim ice fringed the pools and seeps. Judith was grateful for the smoke-tinged warmth in the police cabin, and doubly grateful for the alert attention with which Corporal Holland listened to Uncle Jim.

Uncle Jim was spreading their cards on the table. He had sketched the background of Matthew Hoyt, emphasizing the political side of the crime that had caused his flight. He exhibited letters from string-pulling cronies of high official titles.

"I see," the corporal murmured. "And you've now uncovered new evidence, I presume."

"You could practically call it that. I'm pretty sure we can straighten things out. If we can persuade him to go back and face it—well, there's plenty ways to swing a cat."

"Hoyt—Matthew Hoyt . . . . We exchange a list of wanted men with your authorities, of course, but I can't recall. Formerly a doctor, eh?"

"He used to be. It's hardly likely—"

"I understand. A doctor would be conspicuous. I was trying to think—Louis Marchand knew a smatter of medicine. There's another fellow, one of Hector Bishop's clerks, who's very clever with sickness or injury."

"Now this," said Uncle Jim, "is why we're here." He passed over the letter from Louis Marchand, but Judith noted that he slyly withheld the penciled scrap that accompanied it. Holland read the message slowly. On an official sheet he penned the dates, copied off the wording.

"And you have reasons to believe," he said at length, "that William Kingdom is another name for Miss Hoyt's father. Yes, I see. Rather confusing, isn't it—the way old Marchand expressed himself, I mean—but he was an odd chap apparently. . . . Kingdom, eh? The name's familiar but I can't place it immediately."

"We thought you might heard of him," said Uncle Jim. "He's bound to be somewheres in this vicinity."

"Oh, certainly! Sergeant Hoke could reel off his dossier, I'm sure." He glanced at Judith. "But I'm still somewhat new here. I finished my training only last spring, and I was just becoming acquainted when—"

His smile was self-conscious. "I'll make some inquiries. Could you give me some description, perhaps, and then excuse me for a little while?"

Uncle Jim sounded doubtful. He displayed a blurred tintype of the '80's—a gangling young man in plug hat and choker collar—and went on to give his impression of changes the years might have brought. "It might not be so good, though," he added thoughtfully, "if the idea spread that somebody was hunting him. A man in his boots, not knowing who was after him, might up and skee-daddle."

Young Holland nodded. His lean jaw hardened momentarily. "One of my early lessons," he said, "was what big ears our marsh rabbits own. The Mounted Police still have a few sources of information, however, that are reasonably confidential."

There was a brief silence when he had gone. Uncle Jim put another chunk in the stove, then went to study the map on the wall, whistling a doleful scale.

"He knows you're hiding something," Judith said. "Why didn't you show the

other message and make a clean breast of it?"

"But it wasn't needed. I can bring it out later, can't I? Most likely your daddy's struck gold. Gold's a touchy business, and unless I'm forced I don't want to risk any bean-spilling."

She shrugged. "Honest gold is one thing," she said, "and devil's gold is another. Are you sure that you're not really afraid of lifting the lid on something unsavory?"

"Sure, I'm sure!" he exclaimed. "What makes you so doggone suspicious? Until we know some more of this layout, though, we got to lay our bets down careful."

Corporal Holland was back in half an hour.

"I can't quite make this out," he said. "There seems to be a chap named Kingdom all right—an elderly man, apparently an old timer in the North. He and his partner have been trapping the Kaskaiou. He came to town from time to time, but hasn't been seen since the week that Louis Marchand was murdered."

Uncle Jim blinked. "What's queer in that? Was he a special friend of Marchand's?"

"Not particularly. No especial connection between them. The queer angle is that Mr. Kingdom is short and stocky and speaks with the twang of a Cornishman."

"Stocky," Judith echoed. "A Cornishman—"

"Hold on," Uncle Jim said quickly. "What about his partner? What does the other 'un look like?"

"I had the same idea," said the corporal. "Matthew Hoyt using his partner's name—I thought of that. I could learn very little, however, about Kingdom's trapping mate.

He was never seen in town. Mysterious fellow from all accounts, thicker with old Pesky's Indians than with the whites. His only name seems to be a nickname—Yank was how they called him."

"But that makes no difference," said Uncle Jim. "Keeping shy of towns would fit Matt Hoyt to a tee. This Yank—where did you say he was located?"

"The Kaskaiou. I was thinking, however, that it might pay us to look through the rest of those papers of Marchand's. Sergeant Hoke and I waded through them once, but at the time we hardly knew what to search for. We bundled up a batch for further investigation at the post, but unfortunately—"

He eyed Uncle Jim gravely. "In fairness, Mr. Winslow, I should tell you that the Mounted Police are deeply concerned in any matter that touches Louis Marchand. We've had a series of outrages in the country north, and the perpetrator—or perpetrations—would seem to be responsible for Marchand's torture and death. We want to know why. We want to discover where the connection was.

"The Skull Mountain Indians," he went on, "tell horrendous tales of a night-prowling creature they call Carcajou. Naturally, we discounted the talk—they're so full of tricks and superstitions, y'know—but the bloody business of Marchand's murder brought it closer home. And then, two nights later, Sergeant Hoke was set upon.

"As I say, we'd taken a packet of Marchand's things to the post. Hoke was checking through them, middle of the evening, when he heard a scratch at the door. He went to look and something grabbed him. Grabbed his throat, yanked him, battered his head against the logs. He was lying unconscious, his right leg broken, when smoke gave warning of the burning post. The place was gutted, nothing saved, and Hoke couldn't talk for days.

"His throat was one solid bruise, and his face was scratched as if by animal claws. He could remember nothing of his attacker except the scent, the wolverine musk—"

He broke off abruptly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to horrify you, Miss Hoyt. I know it sounds thick melodrama, a shocker on the stage."

"Oh, no!" she said. "I didn't mean to stop you. It was only—"

The musk, the blotted shape, the brutish face and the clawed hand reaching . . . . She met Uncle Jim's shrewd eye. "It reminded me of a dream I had," she said. "A dream that seems a long, long time ago."

IX

AS they went down the street Corporal Holland told them something of Louis Marchand. He pictured a busy gray cricket of a man, lively and full of cheer. The little Frenchman, self-taught, had made himself a jack-of-all-useful-trades. He was carpenter, gunsmith, mason, assayer. With his medical book at his elbow he was doctor and surgeon and midwife. From a thick tome of law he copied forms and phrases for contracts and wills, mortgages and deeds, marriage certificates.

"Your letter's a fair example," the corporal said, "of his legal style. He usually chose wordage for sound instead of meaning."

Louis Marchand had no enemies. The men of the woods and rivers, white and red and shades between, respected him and called him friend. His simple soul had seen no disrespect in nailing a cross to his roof peak, offering his house as a Sunday meeting place for prayer and common worship. His door was always open to sickness or need, to want of any kind.

"Like young Lomax," said the corporal. "His father was a sluice-box thief, they say, mother a honky-tonk queen, and smallpox got them. The boy lived wild until Louis took him in, tamed him, raised him like his own son. We all supposed that Louis was poor, but it now develops that he owned mining lands, various securities—ten thousand at least, and Ben Lomax inherits the lot."

"What's this Lomax look like?" asked Uncle Jim.

"You'll see him around. Big fellow, splendid woodsman, usually has a devilish dog wagging his heels."

THEY were nearing the Marchand cabin now, and the corporal hesitated before mounting the porch. "Ugly brute of a dog," he said. "Leaped at my throat one time when I came to look around. Perhaps I'd better step in first—"

They entered a long room, a musty and dingy disarray. It was a second-hand shop, Judith thought, that had undergone an earthquake. Skins and trophies vied for wall space with half a hundred religious chromos. Overturned benches, a broken table, a litter of books and garments and utensils, a smashed chair spilling from the blackened fireplace.

"It's much the same as when the body was found," said Holland. "Lomax has sworn, I understand, that he won't sleep beneath the roof until he's dealt with the killers." He gestured. "The body was lying there. A duelling rapier that hung above the fireplace may have been their nasty weapon. We've never been able to find it."

"Carcajou killed him, huh?" said Uncle Jim.

"That's the general belief. Some few, of course—" He shrugged. "Ben Lomax is not a popular young man. He keeps to himself, spends weeks alone in the woods, has frequently shown a violent temper. Some nasty rumors have been spreading, based on the legacy that Louis' death brought him. Now let's see where we'll find those papers."

Judith had been standing apart. There was a book at her feet and she picked it up idly—a dogeared copy of *Les Miserables*. She was moving to place it on a table when she thought she heard a creak, a thump.

She looked at the opposite door. The corporal and Uncle Jim were continuing some discussion, and she had the impression that cutting through their mutter was a woman's exclamation. Absurd, of course. She balanced the book on a pile that included a woods ax, a skillet, canvas saddle gabs. On the floor were a pair of muddied boots, a wad of stained, white cloth . . . .

She caught her breath . . . . Fresh mud on those boots. And the hem of that cloth —was this crumpled ball her handkerchief that a phantom hand had snatched for prowler's trophy?"

Sound slapped at her. A blurt of movement, a challenging voice—it was the tall rider of the lake shore, the lurker whose sweeping hand had warned them so contemptuously. He barged from the inner room with a storm of words.

Was this house a campground? Had a man no privacy? By what right did any-

body, Mounted Police or not, treat his home like a shagbark tepee?

"Sorry, Lomax," Corporal Holland said stiffly. "I had no idea—I understood you were gone."

"Your spies will keep better track of me," Lomax said, "when they learn to tell a beartrack from a beaver run." His fists were clenched, and anger lit the seablue eyes beneath his tousle of hair. Even in stocking feet he stood good inches above the corporal's six-foot slenderness, and his hastily donned shirt revealed a lean-muscled athlete's chest.

"I've begged your pardon," said the corporal. "We came to look into—"

"Get out!" A blue stare backed the order, a look of contempt that included Jim Winslow and Judith in its sweep. "Go back and write your pretty reports, and keep your tenderfoot trippers where they won't get stepped on."

"Quite." The corporal's tone was clipped. He stepped toward Judith, motioning, but she was already turning away. She had glimpsed the byplay at the partially opened door of the inner room. A bare brown arm, a naked shoulder, had edged shamelessly into view. Dark hair rumpled, and oval face—'Chita peeping out at them with sleep-eyed mockery.

THEY shared supper that night with Corporal Holland—a pleasant, cheerful meal. The talk ferried between England and the States until Uncle Jim filled his pipe and planked his elbows on the table.

"Well, Corporal," he said, "what's the latest? What have you been able to figure?"

"You're still determined to try the Kaskaiou?"

"What else is there to do? We can't send word. We can't sit and wait until William Kingdom or Yank just happens to appear."

"And you still insist your niece goes along?"

"Would I be any safer here?" Judith asked. "Three Waters wasn't much protection for Louis Marchand."

"I'd feel easier," said Uncle Jim, "if she was where I could keep an eye on her. Brother Beedle, at the store, has been hinting his willingness to supply guides and transportation for whatever we may be headed, but I'd rather—"

"That won't be necessary." The young policeman was suddenly smiling. "If you both must go, then my orders are simplified. They're not official, of course, but my brother's note strongly indicated that I should take good care of you."

"You mean you'll go along?"

"Why not, Mr. Winslow? There's nothing important to keep me here right now. An early start tomorrow, say? I believe I can ready arrangements—that is, if you'd care to have me."

"Why sure, sure! We'd be tickled pink. The only thing—"

"Well, then," said the corporal briskly, "I must be pushing on. I've made a date for a little chat with Ben Lomax."

Judith's hand moved instinctively, but he misconstrued the gesture as farewell. He had taken his leave before she could think of any speech of warning.

What *could* she say? How much could she prove? A wisp of cloth—could she swear it was her own missing handkerchief? Could she openly accuse Ben Lomax as the Carcajou who stole it?

The doubts were thick in her mind. Perhaps she should have promptly spoken her suspicions to Uncle Jim. Perhaps she should call the corporal now. But somehow she couldn't.

"Doggone it," grumbled Uncle Jim. "We go wading in with the red-coat law and we're apt to scare the bird we're after. I can't make up my mind if he is tagging along for friendly or suspicious reasons, but still and all there was no way we could refuse him."

X

THE horses were big boned, heavy of head and shaggy of coat, bred for toughness. They would travel light, Corporal Holland explained, for though the country was sparsely settled they would never be too many miles from some trapper's campment. His only worry was stormy weather, but that was a risk they'd have to chance. The barometer was al-

ways jumpy in the in-between season.

They quit Three Waters as the town was waking, riding wide to skirt the bogs. Judith had never called herself an expert horsewoman, but she had learned to ride in childhood and she sat her saddle naturally.

Uncle Jim was in his element, of course, and Corporal Holland evinced a mild excitement that seemed to grow as the day went on.

Like a man with something up his sleeve, Judith thought.

He led them at a steady pace. They were following the Wilderness Road, he said, which was no road at all but rather a general route that wended the contours of the country. He pointed the landmarks, shaggy ridges and distant peaks that he charted by compass.

The day stayed brisk. Afternoon rode them through a chain of shallow valleys that debauched upon a wide plateau. A faint haze could be seen, an overhang mist that obscured the heights beyond, and Holland explained the phenomenon.

The Land of the Veils was the Indian name.

Underground streams fed the grasses, and here and there were oasis islands that steamy springs kept green through the heaviest snows. It was the home of the Water Spirits, the tribesmen said, and its vapors would poison the soul of any man who ventured by night within its borders.

"It does look kind of spooky," Uncle Jim admitted.

"The water's bitter," the corporal said. "You'll notice, these half dozen miles, that we'll find no sign of game. Queer country, all this North I've seen. It's rich and poor, wild and tame. It's barren rock piled on fertile earth without plan or reason. It's one world in the summer sun and another when the snow and ice take over. It gives one man a pot of gold and starves a dozen others."

"That's life," said Uncle Jim. "There's lean and fat in the meat that anybody chaws."

"You'd sometimes think," Judith said, looking distantly away, "that none of this was made for mankind. We're too weak, too soft. We don't belong. Yet other times you see some sight, you breathe some emotion, that sets you free. You're strong and brave, as big as life, and only yourself at the moment matters. I—"

She broke off awkwardly. Uncle Jim was grinning, scratching a quizzical brow, and Corporal Holland was gazing blankly.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "You've been reading my mind!" For an instant his features were youthfully intent, then a slanted smile erased the gravity. He shook his reins. "Well, shall we go ahead?"

They traveled north from the plateau, into wooded mazes again, and Holland called an early halt at a brush-roofed trapper's shelter near a forking stream. Tomorrow's hill-and-dale, he told them, would require well rested horses.

While Uncle Jim fished supper from the brook, the corporal set the frameworks for their bed-downs. Judith had laid the cooking fire in the blackened erection of rocks that unknown hands had built, and now she helped to gather branches for the campfire. She watched the corporal curiously as he selected certain sticks, built them into a cone. A touch of flame grew into a thin gray plume that pillared the lazy air.

He fed it into a thicker smolder, and now his hat was smothering, lifting, breaking the smoke into puffs and jets. At length he rose, fanning his hat, and faced Uncle Jim who had halted on the bank with his catch.

"Is that the usual way you set a fire, Corporal?"

"Not usually, no."

"That won't be seen from very far, I'd reckon, unless there was somebody who knew when and where to watch for it."

"I'm aware of that," Holland said, smiling. "I'm also aware, Mr. Winslow, that you didn't miss my excursions today."

"I saw you blaze a tree or two," said Uncle Jim. "I saw you scratch on that bald rock, and fix a forked stick into the face of a cutbank. I figured that if it was some of my business you'd let me know when you got ready."

"And I intend to," said Holland. "Shall we save it until we've eaten?"

THE pearl and gray of twilight was thickening before the camp was ordered and his tale could begin. He told it carefully, starting with the group of Montagnais that made the Devil's Graveyard their stamping ground. There were twelve families, a hundred-odd, the remnants of a populous tribe that had yielded grudgingly to the march of civilization. The missionaries found them unresponsive. Infiltering settlers found them sullen, hostile neighbors, quick and treacherous in defending their self-set boundaries. The traders, the police—

"They simply don't believe in us," he said. "They prefer their own laws, their own brand of justice. They rely on their own crude handiwork rather than on Hector Bishop's shelves."

Their chief was an old man, very holy and wise, with an unpronounceable name that custom had shortened to Pesky. In his youth he had learned the outland usages, and now his energies seemed directed toward keeping the taint of them from his people. In recent years he had even abandoned the usual practice of moving camp with the seasons. Now he sent forth his young men in hunting parties while the tribal elders remained to protect the precincts of Skull Mountain.

From this preamble the corporal proceeded to the list of troubles, the vicious crimes, that had begun to assail the country at the end of the winter past. A trapper near Lake Larue found strangled, and the body of his missing wife discovered weeks later in a cave near the Montagnais settlement. Caches looted, fur packs robbed—and Sergeant Hoke's investigation had only muddled the confusion.

HIS prime suspects were the Montagnais, but the old chief parried him with counter accusations. There was a conspiracy afoot, Pesky asserted, to drive his tribe from the Graveyard reaches. Their traps and plantings had been destroyed and a terror was stalking them. Carcajou had stolen two of their maidens. Carcajou had waylaid a hunter, and Pesky grimly displayed the result. He uncovered the gaunt and wasted body of a once stalwart warrior. Starvation leered from the sunken features, and death must have been a welcome relief from the bone-breaking, knife-gouging, fire-fanged tortures to which he had been subjected.

"An apt name, Carcajou," the corporal said drily. "The wolverine, you know, is a glutton, a spoiler, a wanton killer. The woods have nothing to match him, considering size, in strength and cunning and utter savagery."

Weeks of mounting tension, of increasing bafflement followed. Hector Bishop's post had been raided by a midnight band, rifles and ammunition stolen. Other depredations had been climaxed by the fiendish killing of Louis Marchand and the near death of Sergeant Hoke. In the conflict of clues and claims the Mounted Police were overwhelmed.

Which line of guilt should they follow? Sergeant Hoke had been inclined to believe that old Pesky told the truth, that some combine of hinterland trappers, perhaps, had set out to rid the country of the unfriendly Montagnais. Contrary opinion held, with Hector Bishop, that the sly and tricky tribesmen of the Skull were at the bottom of the deviltry. There was also a third possibility—that Carcajou was a man or men impelled by bestial lust or greeds to ravage wantonly, to despoil for the horible sake of despoiling. Which trail did the ugly truth travel?

"We couldn't guess," said Holland. "Therefore we did nothing. We did worse than nothing, apparently, for when Hoke was sent out to recuperate he was not replaced. I was left to sit on the lid alone, and it may have already struck you that I'm just a bit young and raw, too tender and inexperienced, to cope with such a situation?"

He smiled. "That's what we hoped Carcajou would think. I assure you, however, that the half a dozen fellows in various guises who have come into this section, who are scattered now throughout the Graveyard vicinity, are among the best and keenest men in the force. They've been watching, prying, shaping a noose, and I have reason to think that it may pull tight very shortly. That's partially why I welcomed the opportunity to accompany you."

"I see," said Uncle Jim. He studied the campfire. "Smoke puffs and scratched rocks for trail signs, huh?"

"We had various ways of keeping in touch. I was liasion at the Three Waters end, Sergeant Portal ran the interior set-up. If I read his signs right he was prowling nearby just recently."

"I don't want to seem too nosey," said Uncle Jim, "but I'd like to know how we stand in this business. What's your present notion, for instance, as to why Louis Marchand was killed?"

"I really can't say. He could have died defending some secret. He might have been killed because he knew too much, tortured because he had threatened to betray what he knew. It's obvious, of course, that Sergeant Hoke was attacked and the headquarters fired in order to hide something or other we might have learned from old Louis' papers."

"Have you got some real good reason to think that young Lomax didn't kill Marchand and then arrange things so they'd look like some outsider done it?"

"Is that your theory, Mr. Winslow?"

"No—I just wondered. What I'm driving at—"

"We've been watching the recent movements of several men," Holland interrupted. "Our policy's been to give them all enough rope to hang themselves."

"What I mean to say," Uncle Jim persisted, "is that our concerns are limited to Marchand and Matthew Hoyt. Is there any chance that William Kingdom or this fellow Yank got any Carcajou stink on 'em? You wouldn't be—"

"Listen—" The corporal was springing up. "The horses—"

The horses were stamping, fidgeting, tossing their heads against the pull of the picket ropes. Judith went forward with the men, searching the dusk for the source of alarm, and the animals quieted.

"The bats come blundering this time of day," said Holland. "Perhaps a lynx or catamount upwind." He refastened the holster flap of his Webley.

"To finish what I started," Uncle Jim resumed, "you wouldn't be using us for decoys, would you, in some deadfall trap your spies got arranged?"

Holland was turning to stare at him when Judith cried out. "Over there—" She was pointing to the timber shadows. "Look—"

They all saw the flick of motion, the briefly-limned shape that was gone in the instant that Uncle Jim's hand darted to gunbutt. They continued to watch for hushed moments thereafter, to listen tensely, but the only sight and sound of the thickening evening were the sway of bush and branch, the monotone of the windblow.

"A wolf," Judith said. "It was a wolf, wasn't it?"

"Must have been," said Holland. "Toothless old lobo, probably. Our usual timber breed is decidedly man-shy."

"Corporal," said Uncle Jim gravely, "let's you and me sit down for a heart-to-heart powwow. Who ever heard of a white wolf? What we just saw was the mean-face dog that trails after young Ben Lomax."

XI

JUDITH wakened, deep in the night, to a subdued crackle. The campfire, newly fed, cast dancing brightness into the three-sided lean-to. Corporal Holland sat at the edge of the glare, a blanket draping his shoulders. Sleep was not easily wooed again, and presently she emerged from her sleeping bag.

"Restless?" he asked. "Everything's all right, you know. Quiet as a churchyard."

"I still don't see," she said, "why I can't stand a watch. You'd both get more sleep."

"Wouldn't think of it. Woman's place, that sort of thing. Standing guard is a bore at best. Nothing ever happens when you're ready for it."

"Why would Ben Lomax want to follow us?" she asked.

"I've been thinking more about that chap," he said, shifting the rifle in his lap. "That scare of yours coming in—it does look suspicious. Yet when I questioned him again last night—"

Now was the time to tell him of the handkerchief at Louis Marchand's. The handkerchief with the same wide hem as

her own. Yet with handkerchiefs so all the same, so impossible to identify at a glance—no, she couldn't do it.

"I knew of your scare, of course," he went on, "long before your uncle told me. Your boatmen gossiped about it, but they didn't add the detail of spotting Lomax next morning." He shrugged. "In any event. I'm happy that we understand each other now. As I told your uncle—"

"Did he show you my father's note—the one that came with our letter from Louis Marchand?"

"He did. It only served to confuse the issues, as far as I could see, but perhaps Sergeant Portal can read between its lines. I'd like to assure you again, Miss Hoyt, that to the best of my knowledge the police have no complaint against William Kingdom or his partner. My purpose in coming with you—"

He hesitated. "I do want to help. If I can be of service—I mean to say if there's *anything*—"

"You've been wonderful, Corporal Holland," she said. "I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am."

"I'd like you to feel," he said, "that I'm here to take care of you. You needn't worry—danger, I mean—I'd never allowed you to make the trip unless I felt sure I could protect you."

She sensed the extra meaning behind his words. A midnight fire, the wilderness circling, and her heart aware of his nearness, his open admiration. She looked away, faintly smiling.

"I know you will," she said. "I have every confidence in you, Corporal."

"My friends—" he smiled—"call me Sandy."

"And mine call me Judith, Sandy."

"May I?" His voice was eager, his face was a handsome study in the tints of flame. "I know I shouldn't, of course—"

"Why not?"

"Because my brother warned me not. The postscript of his note reminded me sternly that being of assistance didn't mean to go head over heels about you."

They laughed together. They eyed each other in frank appraisal, sealing a pact of friendship, of understanding. It was a moment to remember, yet Judith's memory of it would always be clouded by the uncanny aftermath.

For as she looked at Corporal Holland—his clean-cut features, his sensitive smile—the brainstorm came. It was as if by the leap of flames, reflecting through her web of thoughts, transformed him. Her mind saw another face, rougher hewn and stronger boned and stamped with passions.

Fierce eyes, a scornful mouth—why would it be Ben Lomax that her vision conjured?

Ben Loomax, the wilderness waif. Ben Lomax, stormy and sullen, suspected by half the town as the renegade killer of his benefactor. He was 'Chita's lover, and why should Judith Hoyt feel an inner pulse at thought of a tawny halfbreed body bent to his embrace, of wanton scarlet lips responding to his kisses?

In the moment's illusion Ben Lomax shared the fire beside her. His hand was raised, forbidding, but suddenly his tense expression softened. Bewilderment came into his eyes. His lips were moving, trying to voice some wordless plea, and then abruptly his image faded. In his stead she saw a writhing shadow-blot that formed into a mask of swarthy savagery, that leered at her with the blank beast-stare of Carcajou.

She must have uttered some instinctive sound, for Corporal Holland was leaning, touching her arm. The mood of their comradely laughter had been abruptly shattered, but he did not question the reason.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I—I don't know what I was thinking." She hunched her shoulders. "Is it turning colder?"

"A bit," he said. "The wind's veered around from the north. Perhaps you'd better nip in again and rest up for tomorrow."

THE tomorrow was bleak. The sky was tended gray above and they traveled through brooding weather that made the trail a humping monotony. The cold abated somewhat and the wind turned coy. There were morning calms when leaf and brush were lifeless, when their horses were the only motion in a doldrum world, and then a gusting blow would stir

a murmur everywhere, tingling flesh with its fluid chill.

It was dreary going, and the worst of it was the hemmed-in feeling that increased as the hours chained on. Corporal Holland was subdued. preoccupied, and Judith noted how Uncle Jim, lagging behind, kept turning his head in scout's precaution.

She questioned him during one of the halts. "What are you looking for, Uncle Jim?"

"I dunno," he grinned vaguely. "These gloomy days get into your system, I guess. Or maybe I'm catching your spookiness, Judy. I somehow got the notion that something's after us. Not trailing us exactly—"

"I can feel the same thing," she said. "It's ahead and behind and all around."

"If I happen to spot any white wolves," he promised, "I aim to shoot first and question whose dog it is later. That likewise goes for any bush-skulking humans."

But the only incident of the day was a superhuman development. They were riding the lee of a valley slope, with dusk still three hours away, when the overcast developed lighter tones. The bluish atmospheric haze paled into silver, the still air had a warmer feel. She could scarcely believe her sight when the first thin flakes of snow began to fall.

It came in a lazy filter that the dark earth devoured. The wind was dead and the white flecks settled gently, peacefully. Corporal Holland rode back to them through the floating veil.

"Had me worried a bit," he hailed. "From the early signs I was afraid the wind might get behind it. Might have made it uncomfortable."

"That's what I almost smelled," said Uncle Jim. "Reminded me of the crazy blizzards that have hit Montana with a winter bang before the winter's begun."

"This is more of a promise," the corporal said. "It won't last long. The wind will swing, the clouds will break, and tomorrow we'll have the sun again. I intended to push ahead to Paulson's Creek, but there's no point to hurry now. We've a stopover hut of our own just a mile or so east of this ridge. Suppose we try it."

The hut was a four-bunk cabin of sturdy logs with a sweet spring seeping from the bank behind it. The snow continued its steady settlement, slackening only as evening came. By then they had roofed a shelter for the horses, finished their meal, were easing to the comforts of a cheerful fireplace.

"Well, Mr. Winslow," said Corporal Holland, "by noon tomorrow we'll be knocking on William Kingdom's door. We'll see what's to be seen in Mr. Yank, his partner. It wasn't so bad a trip, was it?"

"Not up to now," said Uncle Jim, "and the thanks are due to you, Corporal. We still might have some sticky going, of course, if the snow keeps up and a cold wind drifts it."

The corporal laughed. "Not a chance. A sight outside will prove it."

He opened the door and they looked out to a scene of silvered beauty. The early moon had found a rift in the cloudy roof and it played a sheen upon tinseled trees, upon a carpet of white that smoothed contours of the land into a flow of majesty. It was a night of calm, of peace overspreading.

"Looks pretty all right," Uncle Jim admitted. "I might appreciate it more, though, if you and me could sleep right through instead of splitting sentry on the horses."

"Tomorrow night," the corporal promised. "If Hector Bishop followed his usual schedule he's back at his post by now. Perhaps we'll swing over to North Traverse and let him furnish one of his royal dinners. Here—I'll show you how we're situated."

He spread a hand-drawn map upon the rough table, moving the candle for better light. "Yes, here we are. This dotted line shows the edge of the sunken lands, the Devil's Graveyard, and we're right up against it. It's a straight hop across, you see, to the Kaskaiou. I had planned to skirt old Pesky's precincts, but that would waste a half day's time."

"I've had the feeling all day long," said Uncle Jim, "that trouble was breathing down my neck. Is it apt to come any closer when we get into this graveyard?"

"No, not really. The Montagnais have

their main encampment twenty miles away, along the cliffs that base Skull Mountain. They have sacred caves—that sort of thing—and other places here and there that are *tabu* for white men. There's no telling, the way things stand, where guards might be posted or what orders they've had about shooting."

"Yeah," drawled Uncle Jim. "I also recall that you ain't so sure that these scalp-lifters might not be at the bottom of Carcajou's deviltry."

Holland shrugged. "At any rate, I'd prefer to play safe. The roundabout trail is an easy one. Bishop's men run their traps through most of the adjoining section, and if we should run into a blow we'll be always close to safety."

Judith left them muttering over the map. She drew a box up to the fire and let the warmth possess her. She thought of Matthew Hoyt, that shadow of a man whose being had held so little meaning for his daughter. Would he be William Kingdom's mysterious partner? What sort of man would she find? Could she ever learn to feel for him anything more than distrust, a casual pity?

Tomorrow would tell. Her thoughts, the vagrant memories, were a lulling interval. No fears tonight, no brainstorms, no premonitions to suggest the ghastly pattern of fate ahead, the disasters that the morrow would spill upon them.

XII

THE moods of events, the augury, was an angry redball sun that saw the new day start. It peered an evil eye above the shaggy rim of a frosted mountain, and over the pallor of the snow it cast ruby smolder. It shot the blue of night's lingering shadows with blood and brassy hellfire, and its cold flame tipped the dagger peaks. It spread a brimstone blaze, orange-red, across the treetops of a silvered forest.

For passing minutes it glowered from a slit of sky between the horizon and the massed clouds hovering, and as Corporal Holland swung into his saddle he pointed triumphantly.

"You see?" he called. "What did I say? We'll travel mud today."

But in half a mile of riding the sun was gone. Gone to stay. It lost itself behind thunderheads that churned in some passage of upper air too distant for the earth to feel. The hours brought a deepening cold that glazed the snowy carpet, and soon a light wind, tentative, came running through the brush.

Wind from the north, dry chill in their faces.

The hammerhead horses didn't like it. They went unwillingly, and it wasn't the crusty footing they feared. When a rider pulled up to attend a limp, to free the mush that pressed a tender frog, the animals would shake their bits and saw against the rein.

Corporal Holland hurried them as fast as the terrain allowed. By nine o'clock they had finished the wooded westward reach, and as the snow began again they were well along the northeast haul through fairly open country. It was snow that swirled in the growing wind, stinging pellets that came helter-skelter.

"We're close there anyhow," Holland said. "Three miles or less. There's a creek ahead that branches into the Kaskaiou."

The snow was an annoyance, he declared, no cause for worry. He could find his way blindfolded. The thing he didn't like, however, was the deserted cabins of Bishop's trappers. They had passed close to three of them, and in each instance there had been no sign of recent habitation.

The snow played hide-and-seek as they continued. Now it pelted, now it ceased, now it swirled in flusters. The blow increased its force, blustering, and then reduced to a whimper that haunted them through the final mile.

They came unexpectedly upon the cabin. It was set in a sheltered clearing, in a creek bottom cove that was backed by an elbow ridge, and Uncle Jim signaled Holland to halt as he spied it from the timber's edge.

"No smoke from the chimney," he said.

"They may be out on the trap lines," Holland answered after a moment.

"No tracks from this side." Uncle Jim hesitated, glanced quickly at Judith.

"Might've blown over, I suppose. Let's mosey up and see."

AS they advanced Judith did not notice the surface indications that the wind-sweep had obscurred. Her mind was so charged with the moment's suspense, with warring emotions that centered upon this stranger who might be her father, that she was unaware of Corporal Holland's gun-ward move, of Uncle Jim's pistol in his hand, of the protective flanking of their mounts shielding her.

An ax in the snow, a pail, a discarded gauntlet. Here a roughened patch, a trampled bush, brownish splotches along an indistinct pathway. If she saw thsse details they had no meaning.

Uncle Jim raised his voice in a hail: "Matt—Matt Hoyt. This is Jim Winslow, Ella's brother."

The reply was a clatter from the cabin, Uncle Jim and the corporal were dismounting, handing up their reins. They muttered commands, and then they were deploying. Uncle Jim slanted toward the sagging door and Holland went in a crouching trot for the splintered shutter of a window.

They were hailing again. Uncle Jim was at the doorstep when a sound choked from within, gunshot whammed, the corporal shouted. The rickety door topped inward to the thrust of Uncle Jim's shoulder, and Holland was at his heels as they charged inside.

For a frozen instant Judith sat. Then she was down, she was running, breathless, and Uncle Jim came from the entrance to hold her back. "It's all right," he cried. "It ain't him, Judy—"

She thrust past him. Propped in a wall bunk was a haggard death's-head man, black-stubbled face and idiot's eyes and a bloody gash across his forehead. Corporal Holland was kneeling beside him.

"It's Portal," he breathed. "Sergeant Portal. The murdering brutes, the killer devils—they've hacked him to ribbons."

THUS began the hours of terror, the day and the dark and the day again when the furies were unleashed, when man and nature conspired to follow shock with brutal shock and to thrill emotion to a quaver-key beyond the human senses.

They began with the death-watch. Three people cramped in a slattern cabin, grimly helpless, and watched the jaw-locked agonies in which a brave man died. No mortal could aid him now. The rasp of his breath, the spew that trickled his lips and the blood-caked blankets that covered him, were proof enough of the stabbing blade's fatality. One look at his body had grayed Corporal Holland's face. Now he sat beside the bunk, slump shouldered, and waited the merciful end.

A lesser man than Sergeant Portal would be already dead. His eyes stared from dull delirium. Numbed senses answered only to inward surges of pain. He clasped his wounds with embracing arms as if to inhold the final glimmer of being.

The watchers spoke in whispers. Uncle Jim had busied himself to shelter the horses, provide a fire, replace the fallen door against the snowspume. Judith moved mechanically, righting the disorder and boiling the kettle for tea. Corporal Holland, recovering, began a slow pace along the wall.

"Oh God, if there only was something," he said. "Something I could do."

He estimated mid-morning as the time of attack. Impossible to guess the details, but the trampled patch near the woodpile marked the final scene of struggle, of Portal's collapse. Left for dead, no question of that, and yet he somewhere found the strength to drag himself to the cabin.

Too weak to make a fire, the instinct for warmth crawled him to the bunk. He was settled there, waiting death, when their shouts broke into his coma. In the darkness of his mind defense was the single thought, to go down fighting. His efforts to rise had knocked over a chair. and he fired blind into the roof as his imagined enemies pounced.

"His cylinder was fully loaded except for that one shot," the corporal went on dully.

"His coat seems missing, no sign of his traveling gear. What was he doing here? Who knifed him, and why?"

The wind throbbed silence. The broken shutter rattled, spat a white gust into the

room. From the bunk came a choking groan.

Sergeant Portal was turning his head, his lips were moving. They gathered beside him, but the corporal, bent close, could winnow no word from his throaty sigh.

"Portal—" he whispered. "It's Holland, man."

Eyes rolled up at him, eyes empty of all but pain.

"It's Sandy Holland!" The corporal's voice was sharper. "What got you, Sergeant? Who was it? Can't you show some sign?"

In the firelit dimness it was hard to gauge, but for a fleeting second it seemed that intelligence fought the film of pain, Three tense watchers saw crusted lips part, a lick of tongue.

"Holland . . . ." The word was the echo of a breath. "Sergeant Portal reporting, Inspector . . . ."

Then a ragged gasp. The corporal's handkerchief brushed over the red-stained mouth and another gasp tailed into a rising whisper: "Regret to state . . . unable to prove . . . gold in Skull Mountain . . . burial caves . . . . Montagnais will kill—"

A skirl of wind drowned the following phrases. Portal's eyelids sagged, and quick questions did not rouse him. The corporal waited briefly, then repeated.

"Who jumped you, Sergeant? Name him, man!"

The weary lips formed syllables. They breathed a name, trembling, and after it came delirium flooding. Portal's body shivered. He rolled the whites of idiot eyes and his panted babble gained strength and shrillness as it ran.

"Carcajou . . . . Carcajou—the knife—oh, God! Get help, more men, stop the the massacre . . . . North Traverse, get Hector Bishop quick . . . . They're on the march — Skull Mountain, Pesky — he'll murder everyone . . . ."

The burble ended in a bleat, a crimson gush. A shudder racked the straining body, the limp head lolled. For another hour a faint pulse would beat, an indomitable spark of life would fight the abyss blackness, but Sergeant Portal's coma would utter no other whisper.

XIII

THE storm had a dozen voices that chanted devil's requiem for a Redcoat's last parade. The cabin thrummed and the chimney whimpered and the roof reechoed a banshee wail. Beyond the door was a maelstrom world, white chaos.

Corporal Holland drew the blanket to cover Portal's face, and his features were stiffly aged as he made the solemn sign of the cross. He wasn't a pleasant young Englishman, not now. He was the grim-jawed soldier of a deathless tradition, an inexorable code.

"I've got to get on to Bishop's" he said, and his new voice was harshly remote. "This place should do comfortably until I can send to fetch you. This gale won't last. These early northers soon blow out."

"We'll do all right," said Uncle Jim. "Wouldn't you be smarter, though, to wait until the letup comes? Bucking that wind will be mighty tough."

"Waiting might only make it tougher." A pair of racquettes, hide-strung snowshoes, stood in a corner, and Holland was testing them as he spoke. "The snowfall's still light, mostly fluff, and my horse is trained to winter travel. The danger of a storm like this is the heavy pour that sometimes follows, the after-freeze that crusts the drifts. I've got to get on while daylight's ahead."

He fingered a heavy jacket that hung from the wall. "I suppose you understand the urgency of what Portal tried to tell?"

Judith sat on a stool beside the fire, trying to shut her mind to that shape in the bunk. Gaspy phrases still haunted her consciousness, but the scope of horror they hinted remained obscure.

Carcajou's knife had killed the sergeant, but what and who was Carcajou? Gold in Skull Mountain, yellow treasure in skeleton caves and greed embroiling the wilderness. Tribesmen armed for slaughter, driven by savage superstitions and the wiles of a ruthless chief to take the wipe-out warpath . . . .

Such was the background imagination saw. Carcajou, the thought, was the bloody fist that had failed its purpose of

chasing the whites from the Devil's Graveyard. Carcajou was a hulking Montagnais—

But she couldn't think the rest. She couldn't think of gold-lust renegades scheming in old Pesky's lodge, aiding his murderous plans. That pencilled scrap in Matthew Hoyt's hand—no, it meant nothing! The attack on Sergeant Portal here, here at this one lonely cabin—what did it *prove?* William Kingdom and mystery-man Yank—oh, there *had* to be some saner explanation!

The men had been attending their tasks. The blanketed body had been carried out to a shed. A blast of spindrift pushed Uncle Jim inside now, and Judith ran to shut the door as he unloaded firewood.

"Got to fix that door a little better," he said, "and tend that broken shutter. Then we'll be all right, Judy." He brushed snow from his hat, then suddenly gripped her shoulder.

"Buck up, honey," he said softly. "I got us into this mixup but I'll likewise get us out. The corporal and me just had a talk."

His arm embraced her awkwardly, and for a moment she leaned against him, eyes closed. "This whole crazy business is too contrary," he said, "for us to jump conclusions. I don't think young Holland still knows head or tail. There's some simple reason why Kingdom and his partner ain't here. Them other cabins down the line—Bishop's trappers—they'd been cleared out, too, remember.

"You can tell from the wood," he went on, "that this door was forced and the shutter busted quite some time ago. Maybe anybody done it. Portal wouldn't crawled here for safety, would he, if the men who lived here jumped him?"

"But they—they may be dead, Uncle Jim. How can we tell—what can we do?"

"We can hang and rattle," he said. "I'll help you fix around some more as soon as I get back. That shed out there is real good size and we aim to clear stable space for the horses."

She busied herself, when he was gone, checking their scanty stock of supplies. If she kept her hands at work, she thought, there'd be less time for futile speculation. She wouldn't return—and she promised it grimly—to that shadow valley of her fears that had made such a fool of her.

Minutes passed. Bare minutes—that was her stunning afterthought—between Uncle Jim smiling back at her, closing the door, and Uncle Jim a spreadeagle sprawl in the snowdust.

She was hunting a pail to melt some water when thunderclaps ripped through the windy brawl. She made a startled turn, and each explosion of cannonade was a hammer-thump to her heart. Gunblast—*wham* and *wham* and *whack-whack-whack*. Rifle and pistol duelling the storm and a wild yell, demoniac, screeching the reverberations.

SHE would piece together, sometime later, how the vicious attack had launched from the snowscud. They were bringing the horses from the temporary shelter, a rocky overhang, and the opening bullet floundered one of the pair Uncle Jim was leading. He was tugging the pistol from his jacket, yanking the reins of the rearing second horse, when the follow shot staggered him into the thrash of hoofs. His Colt's exploded as he tumbled.

Corporal Holland, ten feet beyond, could only guess the source of assault. Sound was distorted, sight was blurred, and he fired twice at something along the elbow ridge. His own mount caught the frenzy as Uncle Jim's breakaway charge bolted past, and he could not hold the wildeyed brute. The horses blundered free into the gale, and now the bushwacker's taunt resounded.

Holland launched toward the sound, his Webley searching a target, and he had a glimpse of Judith running. He shouted, but she didn't hear. She had seen the bulk of the downed horse, the prone figure of Uncle Jim, and the wind and cold and sleeting lash did not exist for her.

All her consciousness concentrated upon the weight so limp in her arms. A raking gash from forehead to ear had smeared his face. He groaned as she lifted, and now she saw the red-stained hand that

pressed tightly against the breast of his jacket.

There was a gap of memory then, an incoherent interval before her mind could see beyond the deeds of emergncy. She was a wraith in a shadowlogue and Corporal Hollland was a voice occasionally beside her. Only Uncle Jim was real. They moved him to the storage shed and did for him what untrained hands, crude bandage, could do.

His brown face was tinged with gray, his body flabbily relaxed, but he had a shallow lift of breath and a pulse that was steadying. The head wound was ugly, the glancing slash of a hoof that had raked blood and pain and concussion. The critical hurt, however, was the bullet that had ripped his lower body.

The welling blood that wouldn't staunch, the fleshy pucker. That was where the agony would gnaw when primary shock released him. The deeper ravage, the injuries unguessed, would determine life or death for him.

Bullet from nowhere. Life or death for Uncle Jim. . . .

Corporal Holland knelt at her shoulder again, and she heard his murmurs vaguely. Horses vanished into the woods. No nearby trace of the attacker. Heavy-caliber rifle—yell sounded like an Indian's.

But what did it matter now? It was Uncle Jim—she caught her breath. Suddenly her love for him was a lightning stroke that rent the blankness. Hope and faith were a warm sustaining strength throughout her being. Jim Winslow was too good a man, too much a man to die. God had given him so great a share of mankind's best that he wouldn't allow—

"What can we do?" she said. "How can we save him?"

Her voice was toneless. They were humbly kneeled in the shadow of death and the moment's urgence was keyed above the furor of heroics.

Holland's fingers gripped her hand in understanding.

"I've got to get on," he said. "The sooner the safer. The web will be surer, this kind of footing—horses a gamble, anyhow. I can follow the ice—Turtleback and the Upper Lakes—and with luck I can have Hector Bishop's clerk started here by nightfall."

But she knew that this counted the utmost luck. She knew that a dozen circumstances might mean delay, for another day, for two days.

"The other chance," he said, "is the handsled in the corner. The trip will be rough—we'd risk the aggravation of the injury—but I can manage. I might find help along the way, but even solo I could have him there this evening."

"Will you?" she said. "Will you try it, Sandy?"

Skilled care was Jim Winslow's immediate need, and she made the choice unquestioningly. Corporal Holland's slanted look was eloquent agreement with her judgment.

"But there's you, Judith," he said, "Leaving you here—"

She shook her head. She wouldn't be an anchor to them.

"I'll be safe," she said. "I'll take care of myself. Save him, Sandy—do your job—and I'll be praying for both of you."

She didn't remember what else they said. Her chief recollection of the rest was the final moment of shielding her eyes, trying to follow them into gusting emptiness. She would not be alone, she thought. Her heart would trail wherever they went, and from their dangers that waited ahead she would take her courage.

They would get through. They would be safe. Tonight perhaps—tomorrow surely—the rescuers would come for her.

XIV

THE afternoon was timeless. Her emotions were wrung so dry, her sensibilities so numbed, that reality had the texture of a dream. The dream was gray and lazy, and the girl who moved mechanically through it was another Judith Hoyt.

She was the Judith Hoyt of a stranger clime, of an older day, and she shared only surface likeness with the schoolma'am of Pala. She was a throwback to those frontier women who lived by the primitive laws of survival.

This cabin was her fort against the

wilderness, against the storm and the creatures of storm, and she would defend it. Food and water, wood for the fire—yes, she could withstand any siege. Corporal Holland's rifle leaned beside the door, and in her pocket was a loaded pistol. Carcajou, the Montagnais—

Let them come! Let the elements rage! Let the Devil's Graveyard loose all its ghosts and she would find a way to beat them!

She was filled with an inner calmness, a self-security. The anguish past, the perils ahead—could not affect her now. There was the bunk where Sergeant Portal had died, but thought of his death was no more a horror, no longer ugly. It was courage-warming reminder of another man who was fighting frozen trails to uphold the death-defying tradition that the Mounted Police call duty.

The cabin dimness held even a sense of resolute accomplishment. Staying here was her part of the bargain. By braving the ordeal she was helping Sandy and Uncle Jim in the only fashion possible. The Kanawan gorge had taught her a lesson in overwhelming fear and this was repetition. Instead of qualms and doubts she nourished a smoldering anger, a grim determination.

There were rat-gnawed newspapers in a corner, a jumble of garments in a brass-bound trunk, and perhaps she should have searched for clues to William Kingdom and Yank. Perhaps she should feel some concern for Matthew Hoyt, but her heart had no room for a phantom father while Uncle Jim's life was in jeopardy. Sergeant Portal's death-bed gasps—Skull Mountain gold and Carcajou and the Montagnais armed for massacre—were other mysteries beyond her. She thought of them only as the forces that conspired against Jim Winslow with a wanton bullet.

As dull hours passed she was aware of vengeful eagerness growing. No gamble would be too great, she thought, no penalty too cruel, if the risk would lure his ambusher within range of retribution. . . .

In the depths of such thoughts she lost all measure of the stormy rage outside. She was unaware of the wind's diminishing voices until the silence fell.

The latch of the refitted door was difficult to manage, but there was no blow to fight in opening a crack of daylight. She gripped the rifle, peering out, and the utter hush, the transformation was almost unbelievable.

The wind had blown itself breathless and the white-shrouded landscape was a frozen calm. The snowfall had suspended and a damping heaviness dulled the chilly air. From the brush-lined meander of the Kaskaiou to timber's edge was a vacuum of desolation.

She moved into the open, watchful. Off to the west was a luminance that was striving to lift the overcast. Sundown wasn't far away, yet the day seemed lighter, less foreboding, than at any time since the short-lived dawn. She drew a long breath.

This was the turn of the storm that Sandy had prophesied. Would it prove to be a flurry that tomorrow's sun would melt? Or was it the pause of the bitter norther, gathering strength for a new assault of blanketing snow and barrier drifts and cold that would stab to the bone? Judith looked again to the westward glow and took her omen from it.

God let it mean, she prayed, *that the worst is done.*

She was turning back when she saw the stir of a movement. Her rifle was swinging up, covering, then sagging as she recognized the horses that panic had driven into the storm. They were still wary, still full of fidgets. They slowly emerged from the shadow of the woods, but the sound of her voice scampered them off toward the elbow ridge.

She started after them, crunching a crystal footing, but soon abandoned the chase. Horses were flighty but rarely dumb. This pair knew that the clearing meant safety and shelter, and nightfall would corral them, docile and repentant.

The fact of their return was another cheerful token, and as she ate a hasty meal she considered the possibilities. She knew the direction of Hector Bishop's post, and now she tried to recall the landmarks Sandy had mentioned. If the snow hadn't deepened by morning, if the temperature held—

There they came again, and close! The muffled drum of hoofs carried through the stillenss, and as she hurried out she saw them near the storage shed. They wheeled at sight of her, then sidled toward the wall of the building.

She called their names, approaching slowly. The glow had faded from the west, shadows were deepening, but the twilight sheen of the snow etched the clearing in clarity. She was moving watchfully, noting the curious antics of Corporal Holland's huffing roan, and a dozen forward steps showed her the source of his nervousness.

A motion—a slinking shape that merged into the murk at the base of the ridge. Now it halted, posing, and Judith's finger curled the trigger of her pocket pistol.

Not a wolf. This time she did not mistake the fawn and white of the ugly malemute that trailed Ben Lomax.

The shooting lore that Uncle Jim had tried so patiently to teach—squeeze the trigger, all of that—was forgotten. Instead she remembered his words of yesterday:

"If I happen to spot any white wolves, Judy, I aim to shoot first and question whose dog it is later."

She drew, she fired. The pale brute was moving with the lift of her arm, springing aside, but she powdered three fast shots at him. The ridge hurled back the detonations, booming the evening hush, and again the horses bolted the racket.

Judith's arm fell to her side. She stared around the empty clearing, and her eyes were wide with realization of this final link that bound Ben Lomax to Carcajou.

There was something, some blindness in her, that had refused to accept Louis Marchand's ward in the guise of a beast-man killer. Her intuition, like Sandy Holland's, had seen decency, honesty, behind his sullen mask, behind his arrogance. But what was intuition's guess against the mounting evidence?

To begin with, his parentage was bad. Why expect good from the son of a sluice-box thief and a barroom harpy? He'd been raised wild, more like an Indian than a white man, and perhaps this was his tie with the Montagnais. He had cast his renegade lot with their crafty chief, and Louis Marchand's suspicions of this truth may have been a secondary reason for his murder.

Carcajou prowled their camp one night, and Ben Lomax was lingering near next morning. Carcajou stole a handkerchief that later appeared in Ben Lomax's house. Carcajou knifed Sergeant Portal to death, ambushed Jim Winslow, and the malemute beast that shadowed Ben Lomax was the ghost that haunted the scene soon thereafter.

Judith wet her lips. The dusk was creeping out from the circling woods, and her fingers that gripped the pistol butt were white-boned with tremendous pressure. Her muscles were tensed with a mingle of emotions that her mind could not untangle.

At the cabin she turned for a look behind. In her haste to capture the horses she must have left the door ajar, for, now a gap of opening revealed the ruddy inner glow of the fire. She slid inside, forced the latch-beam into its slot, and as she was turning a shadow pounced.

From the corner gloom, swift and black and silent, Carcajou was launching. One giant paw darted for her throat to silence the scream she started. The other slapped her pistol as her frantic finger exploded it.

XV

CARCAJOU, the terror. His knife for the Redcoat spy, his rifle for Uncle Jim, and now his lusting hands to snare a more enticing victim.

He had found some den in the storm. With wolverine cunning, wolverine daring, he had stalked the cabin. He had harried the horses into the open, and her futile pursuit was his opportunity to ghost with the dusk from his covert. The bulk of the cabin had shielded his prowl and the unlatched door was invitation.

And he had her. The pistol was torn from her grasp and her lurch could not evade the fingers that missed her throat but clenched the collar of her jacket. He would not kill her—not until after.

She fought his strength with furious instinct, she-cat clawing. In the semi-

gloom of firelight he was a faceless hulk, yanking her into the smother of a grizzly's embrace, and instead of fighting his forward pull she launched with its impetus. Her hands were talons that raked at the shine of eyes, that felt a fleshy gouge, that woke a grunt of pain.

A jerk, a twist, a rip of cloth, and Judith staggered free. She reeled against the wall, and for a breath's duration that cabin was a vortex of flame and shadow. Carcajou was a catfoot giant that weaved through the whirl toward her. One spread hand was raised to his face and the other reached for capture.

"Run—" he said. "Run an' yell an' fight some more. W'at good is it, Fire-Hair?"

Fingers stroked down his welted cheek. Yellow teeth bared in feral grin. The face the dancing flames revealed was broad and swarthy, brutishly flattened. Liquid orbs, glassily empty, stared from beneath a bushy ridge of brow. Kinking hair and high-boned cheeks and the mongol slant of eye were hallmarks of the racial mix that spawned him. Only in towering size did he resemble Ben Lomax.

There was feline grace in his stalking step, in the swaying crouch and the spread-fingered hands that followed her retreat. He moved with cruel deliberation, savoring the cat-and-mouse, for she was caged to his desires.

The rifle still stood beside the door, the pistol had fallen near the fireplace, but he was forcing her back to an opposite corner. When she tried to circle, to put the table between them, a lift of his hand toppled it. A sudden lunge, a snatch that brushed her sleeve, and abruptly an angle of walls confined her.

He kicked a box from his path. "Felix don't hurt," he said. "Felix is nice."

He closed inexorably. He swept her thrusting hands aside, and the upward stab of her knee was wasted on his thigh. His forearm was a bar of force that struck her throat, pinned her to the logs, and a downward claw of fingers ripped at her from neck to waist.

The slam of his weight drove her breath away. She was sinking, dazed, and her thrashing struggles, her kicks and blows, were smothered by octopus bulk. Her strength was gone, her brain was dead—

Thunder whammed the cabin door. Thunder smashed and smashed again, and splintered wood sagged inward. Carcajou was leaping up to meet the vengeance losed upon him.

What Judith saw was a clash of demons, hell-giants brawling in a dim inferno. She huddled against the farthest wall, and the stun of rescue was a drug that shrank her small and weak and empty headed. In the ruby shimmer of the dwindling fire the struggling shadows merged and parted, twined again, heaved and rolled and floundered. Now in light now lost in shadow, they fought as their ancestors of the caves fought in the primeval.

Fist and foot in a flailing wrestle. Gouge and bite and butt and throttle. They crashed the walls, they bumped the floor, they locked into a four-legged, four-armed worm that squirmed and bumped and crawled into the fire.

Into the fireplace, spark and flame, and furiously back from it. They shook apart, they were up again, and the one with the knife was Carcajou. The other was Ben Lomax.

Fair hair struggled, great chest heaving, hand streaking out to parry the blade that slashed in deadly uppercut. His face was hatred's effigy, and his panted gasps were as bestial as Carcajou's whimper. He swerved aside from the knife's bright arc, his body backing with its drive, and a quick hand clasped the killer's wrist, tugging him forward.

Another hand clamped Carcajou's elbow, and all the weight of heavy shoulders was behind the force that thrust the forearm, like a stick, against the bulge of a stiffened thigh. The sickening crack of broken bone was drowned in a wolfish yowl.

A scream of pain, a body twisting, and Carcajou was down. He was down, his arm flopped limply, but his savagery was unsubdued. He reacted to the spur of pain with the berserk surge of any wounded brute. Ben Lomax was plunging for the throat, and a clubbing swing of fist lashed into his face. The ramming

thrust of the killer's feet found midriff and groin, sent Lomax lurching back. He toppled sidewise, gasping, as a shoulder turn bounced Carcajou up.

The murder knife was at his feet, his foe was floundering, but fear-bright eyes saw only the tipsy door, the craven darkness of escape. He turned, he sprang, he was vanishing with the blast of the pistol that Judith clasped in two shaky hands.

She had no memory of movement. Her mind was still cringed against the wall, and the effort that crept toward the fire, that scooped her pistol up, was none of her doing. Yet there she was by the wreck of the table, on her knees, and her jumpy gun was shooting. Ben Lomax was glaring, lips contorted, tottering as he forced himself to rise. His right leg was gimping, and he cursed as he hobbled ahead in a haltered lope.

Judith's pistol dropped. Her arms fell and her head sagged forward. She held herself thus until her heart crept up from the cold earth, miles beneath, and returned to its warm place in her body.

XVI

A DOG was yammering somewhere in the dark. Ben Lomax shouted a command from close outside, and now he limped through the gap of the door. Judith replaced the rifle against the wall.

"Old Whitey's hurt," he said. "If he'd been close he might have stopped . . . ." He drew a weary breath. "He kicked my wind out—couldn't breathe—I couldn't help his getaway."

She nodded. "I was just coming out to see—" Her voice faltered. What impulse had urged her to take up the gun, to follow him?

"I swore I'd kill that loup garou with my two bare hands," he said. "I swore I wouldn't quit his trail until he paid for what they did to the man who raised me." Emotion misted his eyes. "He made the timber—too dark to hunt—my ankle had to go bad on me."

They watched each other. Judith Hoyt, the schoolma'am of Pala, with her copper hair awry and her arms crossed over the tatters where Carcajou had pawed. Ben Lomax, the wilderness nobody, with his battle-marked face expressionless. They were strangers, worlds apart, yet each could feel the queer communion of the moment.

It was a feeling of rightness, of things in place, of fates ordained to be. It was a quality of accord that glossed the ugliness they had shared, a clean wind blowing the mystery and death and evil from the cabin, a promise of tomorrow's sun behind the night-inked clouds.

"Are you all right?" he asked suddenly.

Her fingers touched the bruises at her throat. "Sit down," she said. "I'll heat some water. We'd better get the boot off before your ankle swells."

Ben Lomax had been trailing them because the signs of Carcajou had likewise pointed north. He'd been waiting out the storm across the Kaskaiou, and three pistol shots had been his summons. He was crossing the stream when he heard her scream choked off, and he had to waste a minute or so in finding a batter-ram log to crash the door.

His voice was matter-of-fact, explaining. She was midway along in her bandaging when a sniff from the dark, a whine, announced the fawn-spotted malemute. He eyed her meanly, head lifted, then came at a three-legged skip to his master's hand. A splotch at his upper foreleg joint marked the injury.

"I did it," Judith said. "Those shots you heard— I fired at him. I thought that you—"

But now she knew the truth. Since Louis Marchand's murder, Ben Lomax had been a man obsessed. Damning the Mounted Police for their do-nothing methods, he had set himself the task of trapping Carcajou. By day and night he roamed and scouted, pried and questioned and chased a hundred clues. He had spied the moves of a dozen men, and several times he had missed his quarry by no more than a mile, a scanty hour.

Like that morning of brief meeting east of town. He'd found fresh camp sign, ashes warm, an empty tin of the meat Carcajou preferred. Farther along he had come upon a woman's handkerchief that

reeked of the musk the killer sometimes used to create a terror guise. He had lost the track at lake shore, and his anger had lashed at the strangers whose canoe came blundering past.

"And now you've lost him again," she said.

He wagged his head. "I've put my mark on him. That broken arm—he won't get far. I know him now. I've seen his face before and I think I know his haunts. He's from near the Turtleback —some foreign name—and I've noticed him in town. Maybe it's lucky he got away—" he stared at the spread of his hands—"for I went a little crazy when I had him on his back there. I might have killed him before I squeezed out the secret of what and who is behind him."

"The Montagnais—" Judith said.

He heard her story of Sergeant Portal's death, but his look was remote when she finished. The murder of Louis Marchand, he said, was a deeper concern than golden caves in Skull Mountain. He couldn't guess why the old man was killed, but from the first he had a hunch that white men were in on it. A more devious brain than Carcajou's was scheming out this deviltry. There were two-three men, in town and roundabout, he'd kept a watchful eye on.

Judith swallowed painfully. "Do you know the men who own this cabin? William Kingdom, man called Yank?"

"I've seen 'em, yes."

"Do you know where they are? Have you any idea of the—the business they had with Louis Marchand?"

"He was in all kinds of business," Ben Lomax said slowly. "He was always helping somebody out. . . . No, Jared Beedle was the main one I had in mind. He knows something. He's into deeper mischief than peddling illegal whiskey. That's why I took up lately with that girl of his."

He was softly kneading the bandaged ankle and his eyes evaded her upward glance. " 'Chita hates her Indian blood. She hates her father for making her a mongrel. Her ambition is to find some man with money enough to take her out of here, and let her think that maybe—"

He shrugged. "It wasn't quite the way it looked the day you came to the house. She showed herself like that because—"

Judith understood. The flaunt of 'Chita's nakedness was a woman's way of staking claim to Eldorado.

MIDNIGHT brought a stirring wind. For an hour the snow came on again, but it was the storm's last gasp. The chill of air was ebbing, and presently the moon rode free from the break of clouds. Ben Lomax stood outside the cabin and thought of the runaway horses in the woods. If morning brought them out again the travel would be no chore at all.

He went inside, stepping carefully, and the freshened fire lighted the oval of Judith's face. She slept serenely. The flames made an aura of her hair, the softened shadows cast her features in a mold of peace, and now he knew what had halted his chase of Carcajou.

The dark, his ankle—yes, that was part of it. But something else, something deeper than a twinge of pain had struck through his kill-crazy fury as he dogged the long-striding tracks. It was the thought of Carcajou doubling back. It was fear that something might happen to her unless he stayed for protection.

It wasn't sane, but there it was.

He watched her with hungry eyes, with humble eyes, and why should he be hoping? Why should he think there had been some current through their talk tonight? What special secrets could a few short hours tell them of each other?

He knew her name and little more. Her uncle had been shot, hurt bad, and Corporal Holland had cargoed him for North Traverse. She had hinted some mixup about her father—this was the reason that brought her North—but if she had explained the details he couldn't quite recall them.

And what came next? Where did they go from here?

He would take her out to safety, sure. Give her back to Holland's care while he went on to nail The Wolverine. . . . Felix So-and-so, that was the name. Came into the country a few years back from up in

the Aleutians. Supposed to be a trapper. Where would he hide? Which way would he ramble?

Maybe, Ben Lomax thought, the sensible move was to hand the roundup over to the Mounted Police. Would Louis Marchand sleep easier in death if a certain pair of hands killed his killer? With Carcajou's identity known his menace was just about at end, and why not let the Redcoat spies wind him up along with the other troubles that beset the Devil's Graveyard?

So ran his drowsy notion. . . . He must have dozed off, despite his intentions, for the fire was gray when Whitey's cold muzzle roused him.

It was in the darkness that dawn would son dispel. He took up Judith's rifle and followed the prick-eared malemute. Old Whitey led him to the rear of the clearing, up the brushy steep of the ridge, and from this vantage he could see the distant move of fire. Did he hear a shout that echoed faintly?

He pumped a cartridge into the rifle chamber.

The approach was slow, and he shifted to a place of concealment where his bullets could cover the scope of the clearing. The nearing sound of voices, of dog-bells jingling, did not reassure him. It was a rescue party coming, as any fool could tell, and yet—

His shoulders hunched. A queer constraint gripped him. Rescue meant an end to danger for Judith, but it also meant an end to the spell that the night had weaved. Rescue was a waking up from sleep-walk stuff to actuality.

A growl rumbled deep in old Whitey's throat.

"That's my same feeling, Whitey," Ben Lomax whispered. "She can do without us now. I expect it's time we ambled."

XVII

JUDITH stirred to thinning darkness. Chill in the cabin, the fire dead, Ben Lomax gone. Lighting a candle, rumaging her stock of extra clothes, he was foremost in her thoughts. She had a comforting sense of his nearness, a sleepy impression that he and Whitey had gone outside just a minute ago.

She was combing at her tangled hair when the outer sound became audible. For a startled instant she couldn't believe—

She cried out as she ran. Hailing voices answered, and the oncoming flare became a waving pine-knot torch. There were figures ghosting through the murk, a dog-sled serpentine, and now the light revealed a face that brought a sob into her throat.

"Mr. Bishop—!"

Hector Bishop advanced from the carriole, limping the snow, and she almost threw herself at him. She babbled.

"Oh, please—how is he? Oh, thank God, Mr. Bishop—I knew you'd come."

His pallid deacon's face wrinkled into a sort of grin. He gripped her hands between his own. "There now, there now," he said. "What's the crying for? Aren't we all here to take care of you?"

"But Uncle Jim—oh, please! Will he be all right? What does your doctor say?"

"Everything's all right, my dear." His blue eyes were tired, his features harshly set, but his voice was soothing. "Steady's the word. We'll have lots of time for talk as we travel. Shall we step inside? My men might like a cup of something hot before we start again."

The others were clustering around, dark-faced men with cradled rifles, but Ben Lomax wasn't among them. She peered quickly, searching the dimness, and perhaps his absence started her curious feeling of something unbalanced, something wrong.

"What is it?" Hector Bishop asked. "Don't you feel well, my dear?"

"No, no, I'm—" She shook her head. Ben Lomax must have heard them coming. She tried to think of reasons why he might not choose to show himself, and the effort only added to her growing confusion.

"Here, here—none of that!" Hector Bishop had her arm. He led her past the battered cabin door. "Sit down, my dear. Don't lose your grip. Here—take a swig of this."

She swallowed pungent, liquid fire. She

tried to smile but her lips were stiff. This was the letdown, she supposed, that followed the rack. It was the release of emotion that warped her thoughts and spread an inner darkness.

"I'm sorry," she said. "His wound was so ugly—the weather was so bad when they left—I had to fight off visions of them wandering somewhere, lost in the storm."

"I know exactly how you feel," Hector Bishop soothed. He tilted his flask into a tincup. "Take it down, my dear—it's what you need. Naturally you're a bit upset, but just sit there and compose yourself. Relax. Put back your head and close your eyes."

She meekly obeyed. The drinks—like sweetened brandy—oozed warmth through her. Her thoughts were calmed. It was crazy nerves that had made her see strangeness and tension in Hector Bishop and his men. Ben Lomax had his own good reasons for—

She breathed. She breathed a long, slow breath, and with it she inhaled a blankness that crept through her body and into her brain. Her eyes wouldn't open. She couldn't move. She was slipping, falling. . . .

The last she knew was a lightning flash of fear. Fear that blinded and overwhelmed. Fear that Hector Bishop's evasion, his ill-concealed grimness, had been that kindly man's attempt to hide the tragic truth that Uncle Jim was dead.

HECTOR BISHOP let her hand drop into her lap. He pushed back his marten-trimmed toque, passed a thoughtful hand over his frosty brows. "Bring up the sled, boys," he said. "Put her in and wrap her warm."

He leaned on his crook-handled cane and surveyed the cabin rumpus. He was inspecting the battered door when his trailsman came to report.

"Dead man in the shed," the newcomer said. "Some stranger cut all to hell."

"I'll take a look," said Bishop. "What else?"

"Plenty sign, old and new. Horse tracks around, and a fresh trail off to the ridge. Three-legged dog and a slew-foot man—can't be gone very far. Shall we take a look?"

The little trader hesitated. "I suppose," he said absently, "that I should've let her explain. We might've learned—" He sighed. "But the sleeping potion seemed to be the kindest and easiest way. Now let me think."

When he went outside his mind was decided.

The morning was shaping clear and cold, some of the worry was gone from his eyes as he sighted the blue-patched sky.

"Back to the post," he ordered. "We'll cut around to collect the outposts. Somebody—whichever runs the fastest webs—cross to the Minumet Rocks and pull the others in."

His men stared sullenly. Voices muttered and rifles brandished.

"Go back an' hide some more?" one lean fellow demanded. "Wait like rabbits in a hutch for The Wolverine to dig us out? Dammit, Hector, I say go on! We'll never have a night of peace until we finish it!"

The ferrule of Bishop's cane traced a pattern in the snow. "You'll recall, Dan Jordan," he said mildly, "that you voted me leader against my will. You pushed me into this latest scheme against my own judgment. If you're bound and set to go ahead I've no power to stop you.

"But it comes to my mind," he went on, tones deepening, "that yesterday's storm changed the situation. It covered some things that had best be checked befor we jump into the fire. There's a dead man in yonder shed, one of that stranger batch we've lately noticed, and the question of who killed him and why is only one of a dozen. How would it suit you. Dan, to learn tomorrow that while we were scattered through the Graveyard, stalking a mare's nest at Skull Mountain, the Montagnais had made a surprise attack and had been firing the post above your women and children?"

Feet shifted uneasily. Men exchanged apprehensive glances. "Hell," said the lean man, "I never thought—you may be right at that, Hector."

The little trader limped toward the sled.

"I usually try to be," he said tartly and primly.

They hit the trail at a steady clip. With a wan sun helping to pack the snow, with rested men alternating behind the pusher-bar, the cradle-bodied toboggan glided the miles. They picked up stragglers as they went along, and Hector Bishop listened gravely to various reports. He rode with Judith, supporting her against the lurches, and in the latter stages he made efforts to revive her.

He rubbed snow at her temples, massaged her wrists. At one of the dog-rest stops, beyond the Turtleback, she wakened briefly. Her heavy eyes opened, her lips moved.

"It's Hector Bishop, my dear," he said softly. "Can you hear me? Can you talk?"

Her stare was glassy. Consciousness seemed to waver. Most of his questions were sleepily ignored but now and again, as they proceeded, she muttered a word, a phrase, a garbled reply. Presently she relapsed into slow-breathing somnolence, and further efforts could not seem to arouse her.

They came within sight of North Traverse, and the hails of the outrunners summoned half a hundred figures to greet the arrival. It was mostly women and youngsters who trampled the clearing and lined the wide porch of the store to start a flow of questions.

Dan Jordon carried her inside, wrapped in a blanket, and rumors began to circulate. Grumpy old Hector Bishop spoiled all the speculations, however, by ordering the men to get back on patrol and shooing the crowd of women and kids off to their barracks.

XVIII

JUDITH dreamed she was in an ocean cavern, miles beneath the sea. She dreamed she was dead, and her body was a lazy bubble floating up through blackness to a pinprick of light above. Up and up and up . . . .

Consciousness came gradually. She thought that she lay on a pallet in darkly-shuttered room, that coals glowed in a hearth, but perhaps this was only another phase of dreaming. Her mind was empty. She had no memory of who she was or where she might be. It was a weary effort to force her eyelids apart.

Somewhere sound hummed faintly. It grew to a whisper, a buzz, and suddenly it was a snarly voice from the wall beside her that ranted profanity.

"Still here?" it rasped. "You let him stay? Do you want us hung, you bloody fool?"

The answering murmur ended with a whack of noise, a yelp of pain. A door near the foot of the pallet was hurled inward, banging, and a figure stormed from the advancing room. She had a dim sense or recognition. In a moment she would know his name and her own, know where she was and why. Now a second man came slinking, holding his face and mumbling a womanish whine.

"Shut up, damn you! Where is he now?"

"The usual—the cellar. I gave him whiskey. He wouldn't go—it was getting around toward daylight—I didn't know what to do."

"You were always afraid of him, you sniveling scum. Aaagh—"

"Don't—no, Mr. Bishop—he threatened me."

But still she couldn't comprehend. Her lidded eyes saw Hector Bishop transformed, saw the cane that flourished above his head and his features contorted, but stupor deadened the impact.

She dreamed that two shapes stood beside her. One was gangling thin, the face of a bird behind gold-rimmed glasses. The other was a bald-domed devil disguised with Hector Bishop's muttonchops. They lifted her hand, they felt her heartbeat, they thumbed her eyelids back.

"What did you put in it?" said the devil. "I asked for a knockout, just in case—not murder in the flask."

"No, no," peeped the bird. "She'll come around. Another thirty minutes—an hour. Why did you bring her, Mr. Bishop? Wha—what are we going to do?"

"We are going to treat her like a noble lady, Mr. Pepper," the devil said. "We are going to pamper and cherish her and

hope she brings us luck. We are going to let her inspire us to turn over a bright new leaf in our careers."

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that I almost made a fool's mistake. A wise man is the man who knows when it's time to quit, and we're quitting our little game. I'm sorry I struck you, Mr. Pepper. Nerves, my temper—I wasn't myself, you see. On second thought it's just as well that Felix is safe with us. It simplifies—stop shaking, you rat!—our most immediate move."

"Move?" The bird's beak twittered. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"To kill him, you dolt! We've only two dangers—him and our fat Three Waters friend. With those two out of our way I'll defy a thousand Mounted Police to prove an ounce of villainy."

AN icy dread that crept through her body, paralyzing, merged the dream into reality. Incredible truth was a frozen tide that replaced her terror with understanding, stark and raw. She must not move. She must close her eyes and guard her breath, for upon this sham her life depended.

Iron control was her one resource. She must not think of Judith Hoyt or Uncle Jim, of any past before this moment or of any future beyond escape. Be blind, be numb—play dead and wait.

"No plan is perfect, Mr. Pepper—" Hector Bishop's voice was rustling leaves —"unless it provides for failure. It's unfortunate, of course, that the storm postponed our righteous attack. Except for a freak of weather our habitants of North Traverse would have already turned Skull Mountain into a shambles. I would be weeping crocodile tears, explaining to the Mounted Police how I couldn't restrain the fury of misguided men who had suffered so much outrage from Carcajou and his redskin fellows."

His cane thumped the flooring. "But it's spilled milk now," he said. "When Felix came scratching the door last night I had the feeling. I knew that he was lying, that we couldn't go ahead until I'd seen what Kingdom's cabin told. And with every mile we put behind us, traveling there, I could feel a stronger hunch.

"As I piece the picture out," he continued grimly, "parts of his story sound true enough. He did run into a man near the cabin, it seems. It was one of the strangers who've been drifting about, and I'm certain we'll learn he was a spy for the law. He tried to question Felix and was answered with a knife. Felix claimed that the storm holed him up, but that's where his lies begin. This girl was responsible for the rest."

"He's crazy, Mr. Bishop," the thin voice piped. "He's an animal. He whimpered like a dog, he slavered, while I tried to fix his arm."

"He shot the uncle," Bishop said, "Wounded him so bad that Holland took the chance of bucking the blow. Loaded him into a handsled, Mr. Pepper, and where do you think they headed? For North Traverse and you!"

"But where are they? What happened?"

"God and the Graveyard know. A hole in the ice, a crevasse slide—men are hunting them now. I almost made a blunder when she started shouting questions, but I covered up in time. I had to think fast, to decide in a snap, and your little emergency flask was handy indeed. You're sure an overdose won't harm her?"

"No, no! But what do you intend?"

"I'm not quite sure how she can help us," said Hector Bishop purringly. "We'll have to wait and see. We must learn, for instance, how much or how little the police spies know. We must go a little deeper into the reasons that brought her here. Beedle's report means nothing. We've got to *know* what they wanted from Louis Marchand, and how they fit into the puzzle of the disappearing Mr. Yank and Mr. Kingdom.

"But meanwhile, Mr. Pepper—" and his voice was thickened now—"we have more urgent calls. Felix didn't break his arm in a fight with some unknown who jumped him in the dark. He tried to attack the girl, of course, and Ben Lomax trapped him. Ben Lomax—do you understand? —and he may be roaming anywhere. Felix was seen and recognized, and how long before every gun in the woods is hunting him as Carcajou?"

The gangling man gave a feeble bleat. "If they find him here—"

"Exactly," Hector Bishop grated. "He can't be found here. He can't be found anywhere—not alive. How drunk is he?"

"He was sleeping an hour ago. I—I barred and padlocked the cellar from outside. I moved a table to hold the trap door."

"Excellent, excellent," Bishop said. "We'll visit him presently. You might in the meantime prepare some more of your tasty sleeping powders. Mix them into a quart of whskey, and mix as strong as you like. You might even use the same prescription, Mr. Pepper that your poor dear wife in England drank."

"For God's sake!" gasped the gangling man. "You can't—"

The flat report of a rifle slapped through his words. It whanged from a distance, lone signal for the quarrel of closer explosions that momentarily followed. Guns slamming, and through the afterwash a babble of voices that hummed the trading post.

But in the shattered room a stricken hush.

The gangling man had pounced for the hallway door. He was cringed against it, staring at Hector Bishop. The little trader was backed to a center table, his cane half lifted and his lips a snarl.

"Get out!" he rasped. "See what it is —who it is—tell Jordan no trouble "

And as the door slammed shut he came gliding toward the pallet. "So you were shamming, eh?" he said softly. "I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't want to hurt you."

XIX

JUDITH would never know what involuntary move betrayed her. He turned upon her so abruptly, was launched so swiftly in grim intent, that her answer to the challenge was sheerly instinctive. She was swinging her legs, rolling, attempting at once to gain her feet and to swerve away from him.

But he was fast despite his limp, despite his white-haired years. He was quick and cool and deadly desperate.

The slash of his cane came singing as she tried to dodge away, a firebrand searing shoulder and throat. It drove her back upon the pallet, and he sprang upon her as she fell. He was a thrashing cat that swarmed her under by fierceness of attack.

She couldn't kick, she couldn't claw, she couldn't twist her neck away from the hand that clutched and clamped.

The pallet collapsed.

It spilled them with a clatter, a bumping thud that strangely seemed to resound in tenfold close at hand. Judith's heel found purchase against the wall, and a frantic twist rolled her briefly uppermost. The butt of her free hand thrust at his jaw, but she could not loose the bulldog vise that throttled her breath, that dimmed her sight, that swirled exploding blackness.

She was overturned, her strength was fading—

The sound from behind jerked at Hector Bishop's squeezing hands. He swiveled around in time to see the connecting door hurled open. It was Carcajou who lurched within, and he was devil's destiny.

His broken arm was in a sling, his face was bloated suet. His eyes were glazed with drink and fright, his voice a tongue-tied blubber.

"Guns—" he maundered. "Dey come —dey're here . . . . Run quick—the woods —help me."

Hector Bishop, knelt to murder, seemed to shrivel. He was a bald and snow-fringed grandfather ape, and the insane spasm that swept his features was almost ludicrous. He lurched to grab at his fallen cane, to prop himself erect. His legs were shaking.

"Back," he croaked. "Go back, you scut! You're dead if they set eyes on you!"

Felix peered at him, and for an instant his eyes held no recognition. Then he blinked and his shoulders hunched and he bared his teeth in a moron grin.

"Back to the cellar," Bishop husked. "We'll hide you safe. Look, Felix—the pretty girl—take her down with you and stay."

Felix drew a step closer and his throat began an animal rumble. His hand reached

forth, a claw of lust, and Hector Bishop moved aside.

Hector Bishop moved aside, and his left hand gripped the ferrule of his cane. His freckled right hand wrenched the crooked handle, and a length of slender steel drew forth, winking at the somber room.

Half a stride, a body lunge, and the biting blade went thrusting home at the shoulder spread of Carcajou.

The hulking shape was driven forward. A stagger-step, a hand that snatched at air, and then the gradual collapse that began at the knees, that buckled the middle that dumped a sodden bulk upon the planking floor.

He tumbled down scant feet from Judith and the tear-filmed mirror of her vision glimpsed brutish features wrenched in agony. His dark eyes bulged, his mouth pulled wide—but a crimson froth muted the scream that his throat strained to utter. His legs kicked, his body shuddered.

Judith clawed the wall. Her lips were mouthing shrill alarm, but it seemed that the ghost hands of Hector Bishop were still enclamped, choking her voice to a whisper. She had no strength to pull erect, no force to resist, no spark of will to oppose him.

There he was, there he came, and he would kill her.

The little trader was bent in a crouch, traitor blade poised above Carcajou's bulk, and the suck of his breath was a noisy sigh. His terrible eyes flicked toward the girl, and for a listening instant he weighed decision. Then he came.

He made a limping step past the updrawn legs of Carcajou, and that was his fate. Those legs kicked out and tangled his own, unbalanced him. He stumbled sidewise, yelling, flailing an awkward blade, and as he dropped a swash of steel was slashing to meet him.

Death had its fangs in Carcajou, but the pumping poison had not dimmed the spark of cunning, had not sapped the die-hard's final frenzy. He was squirming as his foot hooked out, and his hairy hand unsheathed the gleam of a long-bladed skinning knife. He drove it up and outward in a lunging arc of backhand power that outsped the trader's counterstroke, in a scimitar slash that melted through flesh and sinew.

Judith flung an arm to hide her eyes. She was fumbling, reeling along the wall. She bobbled on legs that were rubber hinged and the wallowing horror was behind her. She was at the outer door—

The gangling man swam through its opening.

"Mr. Bishop!" he cried. "The police —the Montagnais—" And suddenly he was cringing back, his goggling glasses turned to Judith.

"Mr. Bishop—" he moaned. "You've cut his head off!"

She wavered to a corridor. She pushed through a curtained entrance into a high, wide trading space—shelves and counters and tables and faces turned to stare. A woman pointed, a man sprang toward her, and her lips were shouting soundless as she struck aside his aiding grasp.

The double-doored entrance, the sounds of the porch. . . . Shawl-hooded figures figures with guns, figures squinting into the snowglare. She might have fallen down the crowded steps if hands had not supported her. They tried to hold her, shouting questions, but she shouldered on.

Her run was a shamble. One arm was pressed across her heart, a hand was at her throat, exhaustion was her shadow, but she had to reach the marching group that approached across the clearing.

Now they saw her. The scarlet blob of the policeman's coat was surging out to meet her. Other figures joined his hurry, voices belling. Sandy Holland's voice, and Ben's . . . .

But the one who came the fastest was a tall unknown in a furry parka. He cried her name in stranger's tones, his haggard face woke no memory, but instinct knew the meaning of his arms stretched out and they were the heaven that enfolded her.

XX

WORDS tugged at the ravels in the skein of mystery, and with time the weave of truth appeared. But for Judith the most important truth was that Uncle Jim was safe. His crisis was past, he was

rallying, and rest and care would soon restore him.

He was at a temporary camp a few miles east of the Turtleback where luck had landed him.

It was luck, Sandy Holland said ruefully, that had stemmed from near disaster. A mistaken fork of a creek had led him astray, and when he floundered through an icy airhole, he thought that the fates had turned thumbs down. But it was the smoke of his thaw-out fire that led the Montagnais outposts to him. Matthew Hoyt was in charge of the party that had set out to scout against attack, and his hands had the doctor's skill to perform the immediate operation that turned the tide in Jim Winslow's favor.

"I was pretty much worn down myself," the corporal continued apologetically, "and by the time we could get back for you, Judith, the cabin was bare. Our second stroke of luck was running upon Ben Lomax. We joined our forces, picked up these other chaps, and—well, and here we are."

THE rest of it was detailed at an informal court of inquiry that met in the late afternoon. Hector Bishop's trappers, the catspaws in his sly campaign, were still reluctant to believe that the little trader of North Traverse was other than an honest man. Carcajou and the Montagnais were so welded in their minds that they balked at contrary explanation. Sight of Indians in the group had drawn their instant fire as Holland's party approached the post, and most of the men in the muttering knots outside still clung purposefully to their rifles.

For this reason a dozen of them, with Dan Jordan as spokesman, were present at the meeting in the room that Hector Bishop called his study. It was the same high-raftered room—paneled walls and neatly shelved books—where Judith had suffered the wakening throes, where fate had ordained cruel judgment, and it was grimly appropriate, she thought, that here should be the curtain-fall upon the stage of horrors.

She sat beside her new-found father, and the clasp of their hands were prophecy. Ben Lomax was posted along the wall, fidgeting, pretending vast abstraction whenever she glanced at him. Corporal Holland was busy at the center table, collecting the evidence, and the four men grouped around him were the hard-faced operatives of Sergeant Portal's spy squad. A stocky gray-haired man conducted the proceedings.

"From the young lady's testimony," he said, after a brief preface, "and from the statement of the prisoner, Clyde Pepper, we have our confirmation of Bishop's project. It was a double-pronged strategy of terror, originally aimed at the Montagnais, and later adapted to influence his own people against them. His chief tool was the *metis* Aleut, Felix Ostrow, whose body lies in the room beyond.

"Ostrow was a pathologic brute. As long as a year ago, Pepper tells us, Bishop gathered proof of his guilt in those early criminal attacks that alarmed the locality. He used this proof to cow Ostrow into his service, perhaps with the idea of driving the Indians, his unfriendly neighbors, from fur territory he coveted. Later, as we'll show, he learned that a richer stake might be stolen. This was incentive to increase his efforts, to devise greater cruelties, to include his own people in the terror spread.

"Felix haunted the Graveyard, the Skull Mountain village. His wolverine scent, his victims clawed, were details calculated to prey on the Indian superstition. When their purpose failed, when the Montagnais refused to stampede, he was temporarily baffled. But Carcajou, slinking one night past a lonely cabin, let his lust turn again upon one of the North Traverse women. From that sprang the secondary scheme.

"The woman's body was so disposed that suspicions led to the Skull Mountain settlement. Other atrocities were similiarly devised. When you gathered here at the store, I suppose, the clever Mr. Bishop led you on. Advising patience, advising caution, suggesting you leave it all to the police, he let you force him into leadership. He let you persuade him that lives weren't safe until the Indian menace was forcefully removed. If the storm hadn't stayed you, gentlemen, your hands would

be red with murder. What about it, Mr. Jordan?"

"Why, I—we—" Dan Jordan stood awkwardly. "We thought we had to tend to them before they came for us. They looted here and stole them rifles—I know that for a fact. Hector claimed that none of our families were safe, scattered as they were, so we built the barracks yonder. The Mounted Police wasn't paying no heed, not that we knew, and it looked like our next move. There'd been red hell to pay, I expect, if we'd closed our trap on the Graveyard."

"I think it's only fair to note right here," Sandy Holland said, "that even the police had no positive knowledge of the true situation. I'm still undecided what Sergeant Portal was trying to tell us as he died. At the time I thought he was warning of a Montagnais attack, but now I see the other likelihood. I wouldn't want to swear, however, that he had the goods on Bishop. He probably meant to stop you men of the post from taking the trail of outlawry."

"Note the fact in evidence," said the gray-haired man. "And now we'll hear the story from the other camp. Will you tell us again please, Mr.—ah—"

Judith's father was rising. "Most of you know me as Yank," he said, "but I want my rightful name, Matthew Hoyt, entered in the record. It's a name I've shamed and neglected, but I hope that henceforth—"

He looked down at Judith. "We'll try to make it mean something again," he said.

HE was tall and straight. He repeated the substance of the story she had already heard. A crippled hunter, a sick papoose, an epidemic in the village—these were the stages in the friendship between Yank, the trapper, and the Montagnais. In the course of time he had won the respect of old Chief Pesky, who despised all white men and their ways.

One night the gaunt and toothless chief, fearing his own infirmity and doubting the brains of his successor, had revealed the secret of Skull Mountain's burial caves. He showed the ancient symbols, the crude figurines of worship, that had been handed down in golden quartz. He led the way to abandoned diggings, to veins of incredible richness locked in the rock.

Could The Healer, the old man pleaded, tell him what to do? For generations these certain passages had been tabu. One of the braves had violated their secrets not ten days ago, and already the devil-

THE ICE BRIDGE

It was "Tarantula Jack" Smith, of Arizona, who discovered a mountain of copper in Alaska. He staked claims for himself, his partner, and a few friends. Seven of them later sold their interests to a young mining engineer, Steve Birch, just out of Columbia University, for $25,000 each—the capital being furnished by a mining syndicate.

This mountain became one of the world's greatest copper mines—the Kennecott. But before the ore could be taken out it was necessary to build a railroad, 190 miles long. The only feasible route lay along the Copper River Valley—and here were several natural obstacles: glaciers. One of these was Child's Glacier, 300 feet high and three miles long. The river swirled about its base, and continually undercut the mass. Great chunks of ice, as large as a skyscraper, often would break away from the sheer precipice, and fall into the river with a tremendous splash.

Across the river was Miles Glacier, an imposing sight in itself. The two of them constituted a formidable engineering problem.

The railroad contractor was the famous Mike Heeney, who already had one railroad to his credit that, people said, "couldn't be built." It was his job to build a bridge across the river near Child's Glacier.

Nature might raise obstacles to the building of the railroad, but she also furnished the foundation for the false-work of the bridge—the river ice. Throughout the winter months a crew of hundreds of men worked, in shifts, around the clock. And they really worked! They admired Mike even if he was a driver, and were proud to be a part of his outfit. They realized that if the river ice moved before the last span was bolted in place, the huge structure and months of labor would be lost.

It was a race against time and the elements—and the railroaders won! The ice broke up, and carried the false-work with it, one hour after the last nut had been tightened. The bridge held. The first train to return from the Kennecott Copper Mine brought out the most valuable consignment of copper ore that was ever moved in the history of the world. Steve Birch's options had paid off!

wolf had come to punish them. Or perhaps the spirits had been offended by the evil thought in Pesky's mind. The white man's yellow metal, he knew, brought only sorrow to his people, and yet he had been pondering ways to turn it into good.

It might send chosen youths, he thought, to the distant schools where they would learn to cure the coughing sickness, the killing fevers, by better methods than the shaman's spells and brews. He could see many other proper uses, benefits for all his tribe, if The Healer agreed such a course was wise and would guide him in arranging it.

"I promised to do what I could," Matthew Hoyt said gravely. "It wasn't the share that would come my way that affected me so much, but rather the fact that he trusted me. I'd been roaming the rims of hell for so many years, broke and damned and useless, that I'd lost all pride and faith in myself. Pesky opened my eyes. Since he mistrusted the police, and since I had no reason to love them, we arranged to count two others in on the deal. My partner, Bill Kingdom, was one, and Louis Marchand the other."

For various reasons they had to move slowly. The extent of deposits had to be checked. The complications of mining law needed study, and expert opinion had to be sought as to the Dominion status of the Montagnais. On top of all these doubtful elements was the terror that Carcajou unleashed upon the tribal village.

He fired crops, destroyed their traps, sent rocks and devil's laughter rolling down the moonless mountain. Within a week two maidens disappeared, and even the tough old chief had begun to believe that ancient gods had ordained a plague. He was almost ready to block up the caves, move the tribe away, when Hector Bishop overplayed his hand.

The little raider came riding into camp one day, full of sympathy. His own people had suffered much from Carcajou, he said, and he pitied the plight of his harried neighbors. If their supplies were short they could draw on him. They could pay him from the coming winter's catch, Or maybe they would prefer to pay me with other pieces of the yellow-shot stone, the prayer discs, such as one of the braves had traded to Jared Beedle, a month ago, for a jug of whiskey.

XXI

THE men of North Traverse, the trappers of the Upper Lakes, listened with growing solemnity as point after point forged the chain of guilt. Doubt faded from the sidelong glaces they exchanged and harsh conviction etched their faces.

They knew Hector Bishop's hard-mouthed stubbornness. Viewing him now in another light they could understand his terrier rage that had answered the old chief's rebuff with the capture and torture of a hunting brave. They could see why the Montagnais, in desperate reprisal, had raided a storehouse at the post for supplies and guns and ammunition, the tools of survival.

Matthew Hoyt held up Hector Bishop's cane. A turn of the crooked handle, a click, and he drew out the length of mottled steel, the murderous skewer.

"There wasn't a better man in the world than Louis Marchand," Matthew Hoyt said gravely. "He traveled out, down the coast, to get the final opinions on the legal aspects. I'd told him my troubles with the law. I'd explained about my wife and child, how I wanted them to share the luck when my ship came in. So he wrote a letter in my behalf, unknown to me, and enclosed a sample of my writing to hint the truth his letter concealed. He advanced a thousand dollars of his own—"

His voice faltered.

The gray-haired man displayed the sword cane. "And when he returned he found this waiting. Bishop and Carcajou called on him by night. Perhaps they wanted the gold locations, perhaps they rightly counted him as the keystone of the opposition. The utter savagery that plunged this blade time and time again into a helpless man, the cunning that later removed a rapier from the wall—there's the reality behind our mild and saint-faced little devil."

JUDITH stood near the doorway, her hand on her father's arm, when the meeting ended and figures filed from the room. The sun looked in through the opposite windows, golden bright, a soft glory tinting the forest masses, the field of snow. Its reflections painted the panels gay, cast a luminance on her seeking face and polished her copper hair.

Ben Lomax waited for a man to pass. "So long," he said. "They're sending to pick up Jared Beedle and I thought I'd cut the same trail."

"You're going?" she said.

"I may as well. Whitey's anxious for home. I expect that you—you'll probably be held up for a while."

She nodded. There was Uncle Jim to take care of. There were her father's problems yet to be solved. There were so many things.

"You'll probably be making it out before the winter sets in bad," he said. "If I happen to miss you when you pass through town—well, maybe you'll send a California postcard."

It was queer, she thought. Either the world was queer or all the people in it. A California postcard, that was what he said, and that was how she thought of Pala. Pala was a neat and pretty picture far away.

Somehow the comparison expressed the way she felt. She had fought through the nightmare shadow. She had traveled the storm and now the calm was ahead. There would be other storms, other fears and dangers, but in her heart was a strength that would grow with facing them.

"Don't go, Ben," she said softly. "Stay here—stay with me."

His dawning look, the clench of his hand, the swift emotion that wavered his voice—they were memories for the future.

"You mean—you mean you *want* me to?"

She nodded. She was smiling at him, seeing him alone, and her heart was in her eyes.

Matthew Hoyt looked proudly down at her. Corporal Sandy Holland, rising from his judgment table, was a second knowing witness to the scene. His glance moved from Judith to Ben Lomax, then quickly back. A reluctant grin traced over his lips and his shoulders straightened. His hand lifted stiffly, touched his brow, and the crisp salute of the Royal Mounted was cheerio and luck to them.

BREATHE DEEP, MR. SEAL

In the Western Arctic, in winter, the chief problem of the hair seal is to find a breathing hole. He is a provident creature, and when the ice begins to form early in October he begins to make his preparations. He does not worry while the ice is less than four inches thick; with his well-upholstered head he can "bunt" his way straight upward through such ice, and thus make all the breathing holes he requires. The number may be twelve or fifteen, and they are made at intervals of from 15 to 25 yards.

By industriously gnawing at the under side of these holes as the ice becomes thicker, the seal keeps them open all winter. True, they may not be more than an inch or two in diameter at the surface—and they may be covered with snow, but the seal manages to breathe. As the ice thickens to four or five feet, these breathing holes become cigar-shaped chambers large enough to accommodate the seal. These are perpendicular, of course; but the seal also makes other cigar-shaped chambers above the water-line, in the ice shelf, where he can lie and where his mate can give birth to her pups.

A polar bear or an Eskimo dog can locate these breathing holes through their keen sense of smell. When this is done by a dog trained for the purpose, his master ties him up and takes over. He pokes around in the snow with a rod long enough to reach down into the water until the rod slips through. Working quietly, so as not to alarm the seal, he pulls out the rod and fills the hole with soft snow so that no light will shine through to frighten the seal. Then he scrapes away the snow above the breathing hole until there is a layer only a few inches thick. The hunter then takes his ivory "indicator" and sticks it down through the snow and into the water. When the seal rises to breathe, his nose will strike this indicator and shove it upward.

When this happens—and it may not be within four hours if the seal has a dozen breathing holes, and all of them are open—the hunter drives his harpoon down alongside the indicator, kills the seal, takes a turn around his leg while he enlarges the hole with his ice spear, and drags the seal out onto the ice.

THE WIT OF PORPORTUK

By JACK LONDON

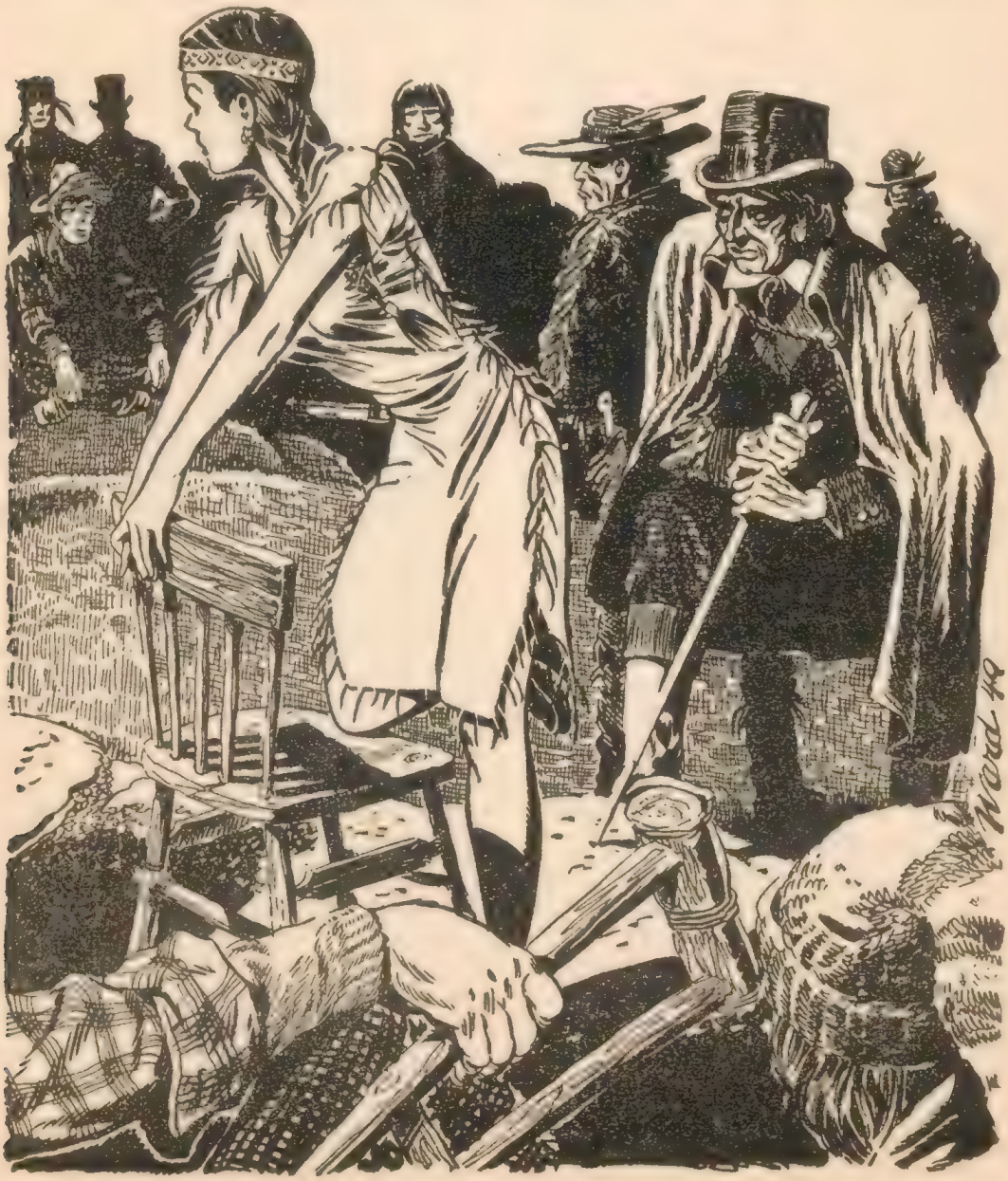
The exciting tale of an old man's hunger for El-Soo, nimble-witted and beauteous daughter of a chieftain . . . told by the Northland's peerless author, Jack London.

"Twenty-three thousand," boomed the auctioneer, and Porportuk squirmed frightfully.

EL-SOO HAD BEEN a mission girl. Her mother had died when she was very small, and Sister Alberta had plucked El-Soo as a brand from the burning, one summer day, and carried her away to Holy Cross Mission and dedicated her to God. El-Soo was a full-blooded Indian, yet she exceeded all the half-breed and quarter-breed girls. Never had the good sisters dealt with a girl so adaptable and at the same time so spirited.

El-Soo was quick, and deft, and intelligent; but above all she was fire, the living flame of life, a blaze of personality that was compounded of will, sweetness, and daring. Her father was a chief, and his blood ran in her veins. Obedience, on the part of El-Soo, was a matter of terms and arrangement. She had a passion for equity, and perhaps it was because of this that she excelled in mathematics.

But she excelled in other things. She learned to read and write English as no girl had ever learned in the mission. She led the girls in singing, and into song she carried her sense of equity. She was an artist, and the fire of her flowed toward creation. Had she from birth enjoyed a



more favorable environment, she would have made literature or music.

Instead she was El-Soo, daughter of Klakee-Nah, a chief, and she lived in the Holy Cross Mission where there were no artists, but only pure-souled sisters who were interested in cleanliness and righteousness and the welfare of the spirit in the land of immortality that lay beyond the skies.

The years passed. She was eight years old when she entered the mission; she was sixteen, and the sisters were corresponding with their superiors in the order concerning the sending of El-Soo to the United States to complete her education, when a man of her own tribe arrived at Holy Cross and had talk with her. El-Soo was somewhat appalled by him. He was dirty. He was a Caliban-like creature, primitively ugly, with a mop of hair that had never been combed. He looked at her disapprovingly and refused to sit down.

"Thy brother is dead," he said shortly.

El-Soo was not particularly shocked. She remembered little of her brother. "Thy father is an old man, and alone," the messenger went on. "His house is large and empty, and he would hear thy voice and look upon thee."

Him she remembered—Klakee-Nah, the headman of the village, the friend of the missionaries and the traders, a large man thewed like a gaint, with kindly eyes and masterful ways, and striding with a consciousness of crude royalty in his carriage.

"Tell him that I will come," was El-Soo's answer.

Much to the despair of the sisters, the brand plucked from the burning went back to the burning. All pleading with El-Soo was vain. There was much argument, expostulation, and weeping. Sister Alberta even revealed to her the project of sending her to the United States. El-Soo stared wide-eyed into the golden vista thus opened up to her, and shook her head. In her eyes persisted another vista. It was the mighty curve of the Yukon at Tanana Station, with the St. George Mission on one side, and the trading post on the other, and midway between the Indian village and a certain large log house where lived an old man tended upon by slaves.

All dwellers on the Yukon bank for twice a thousand miles knew the large log house, the old man, and the tending slaves; and well did the sisters know the house, its unending revelry, its feasting, and its fun. So there was weeping at Holy Cross when El-Soo departed.

THERE was a great cleaning up in the large house when El-Soo arrived. Klakee-Nah, himself masterful, protested at this masterful conduct of his young daughter; but in the end, dreaming barbarically of magnificence, he went forth and borrowed a thousand dollars from old Porportuk, than whom there was no richer Indian on the Yukon. Also Klakee-Nah ran up a heavy bill at the trading post. El-Soo recreated the large house. She invested it with new splendor, while Klakee-Nah maintained its ancient traditions of hospitality and revelry.

All this was unusual for a Yukon Indian, but Klakee-Nah was an unusual Indian. Not alone did he like to render inordinate hospitality, but, what of being a chief and of acquiring much money, he was able to do it. In the primitive trading days he had been a power over his people, and he had dealt profitably with the white trading companies. Later on, with Porportuk, he had made a gold strike on the Koyukuk River. Klakee-Nah was by training and nature an aristocrat. Porportuk was bourgeois, and Porportuk bought him out of the gold mine. Porportuk was content to plod and accumulate. Klakee-Nah went back to his large house and proceeded to spend. Porportuk was known as the richest Indian in Alaska. Klakee-Nah was known as the whitest. Porportuk was a moneylender and a usurer. Klakee-Nah was an anachronism—a medieval ruin, a fighter and a feaster, happy with wine and song.

El-Soo adapted herself to the large house and its ways as readily as she had adapted herself to Holy Cross Mission and its ways. She did not try to reform her father and direct his footsteps toward God. It is true, she reproved him when he drank overmuch and profoundly, but that was for the sake of his health and the direction of his footsteps on solid earth.

The latchstring to the large house was always out. What with the coming and the

going, it was never still. The rafters of the great living room shook with the roar of wassail and of song. At their table sat men from all the world and chiefs from distant tribes—Englishmen and colonials, lean Yankee traders and rotund officials of the great companies, cowboys from the Western ranges, sailors from the sea, hunters and dog mushers of a score of nationalities.

El-Soo drew breath in a cosmopolitan atmosphere. She could speak English as well as she could her native tongue, and she sang English songs and ballads. The passing Indian ceremonials she knew, and the perishing traditions. The tribal dress of the daughter of a chief she knew how to wear upon occasion. But for the most part she dressed as white women dress. Not for nothing was her needlework at the mission and her innate artistry. She carried her clothes like a white woman, and she made clothes that could be so carried.

In her way she was as unusual as her father, and the position she occupied was as unique as his. She was the one Indian woman who was the social equal with the several white women at Tanana Station. She was the one Indian woman to whom white men honorably made proposals of marriage. And she was the one Indian woman whom no white man ever insulted.

For El-Soo was beautiful—not as white women are beautiful, not as Indian women are beautiful. It was the flame of her, that did not depend upon feature, that was her beauty. So far as mere line and feature went, she was the classic Indian type. The black hair and the fine bronze were hers, and the black eyes, brilliant and bold, keen as sword light, proud; and hers the delicate eagle nose with the thin, quivering nostrils, the high cheekbones that were not broad apart, and the thin lips that were not too thin. But over all and through all poured the flame of her—the unanalyzable something that was fire and that was the soul of her, that lay mellow-warm or blazed in her eyes, that sprayed the cheeks of her, that distended the nostrils, that curled the lip, or, when the lip was in repose, that was still there in the lip, the lip palpitant with its presence.

And El-Soo had wit—rarely sharp to hurt, yet quick to search out forgivable weakness. The laughter of her mind played like lambent flame over all about her, and from all about her arose answering laughter. Yet she was never the center of things. This she would not permit. The large house, and all of which it was significant, was her father's; and through it, to the last, moved his heroic figure—host, master of the revels, and giver of the law. It is true, as the strength oozed from him, that she caught up responsibilities from his failing hands. But in appearance he still ruled, dozing ofttimes at the board, a bacchanalian ruin, yet in all seeming the ruler of the feast.

And through the large house moved the figure of Porportuk, ominous, with shaking head, coldly disapproving, paying for it all. Not that he really paid, for he compounded interest in weird ways, and year by year absorbed the properties of Klakee-Nah. Porportuk once took it upon himself to chide El-Soo upon the wasteful way of life in the large house—it was when he had about absorbed the last of Klakee-Nah's wealth—but he never ventured so to chide again. El-Soo, like her father, was an aristocrat, as disdainful of money as he, and with an equal sense of honor as finely strung.

Porportuk continued grudgingly to advance money, and ever the money flowed in golden foam away. Upon one thing El-Soo was resolved—her father should die as he had lived. There should be for him no passing from high to low, no diminution of the revels, no lessening of the lavish hospitality. When there was famine, as of old, the Indians came groaning to the large house and went away content. When there was famine and no money, money was borrowed from Porportuk, and the Indians still went away content. El-Soo might well have repeated, after the aristocrats of another time and place, that after her came the deluge. In her case the deluge was old Porportuk. With every advance of money he looked upon her with a more possessive eye, and felt burgeoning within him ancient fires.

BUT EL-SOO had no eyes for him. Nor had she eyes for the white men who wanted to marry her at the mission with ring and priest and book. For at Tanana

Station was a young man, Akoon, of her own blood and tribe and village. He was strong and beautiful to her eyes, a great hunter, and, in that he had wandered far and much, very poor; he had been to all the unknown wastes and places; he had journeyed to Sitka and to the United States; he had crossed the continent to Hudson Bay and back again, and as seal hunter on a ship he had sailed to Siberia and for Japan.

When he returned from the gold strike in Klondike he came, as was his wont, to the large house to make report to old Klakee-Nah of all the world that he had seen; and there he first saw El-Soo, three years back from the mission. Thereat Akoon wandered no more. He refused a wage of twenty dollars a day as pilot on the big steamboats. He hunted some and fished some, but never far from Tanana Station, and he was at the large house often and long. And El-Soo measured him against many men and found him good. He sang songs to her, and was ardent and glowed until all Tanana Station knew he loved her. And Porportuk but grinned and advanced more money for the upkeep of the large house.

Then came the death table of Klakee-Nah. He sat at feast, with death in his throat, that he could not drown with wine. And laughter and joke and song went around, and Akoon told a story that made the rafters echo. There were no tears or sighs at that table. It was no more than fit that Klakee-Nah should die as he had lived, and none knew this better than El-Soo, with her artist sympathy. The old roistering crowd was there, and, as of old, three frost-bitten sailors were there, fresh from the long traverse from the Arctic, survivors of a ship's company of seventy-four. At Klakee-Nah's back were four old men, all that were left him of the slaves of his youth. With rheumy eyes they saw to his needs, with palsied hands filling his glass or striking him on the back between the shoulders when death stirred and he coughed and gasped.

It was a wild night, and as the hours passed and the fun laughed and roared along, death stirred more restlessly in Klakee-Nah's throat.

Then it was that he sent for Porportuk. And Porportuk came in from the outside frost to look with disapproving eyes upon the meat and wine on the table for which he had paid. But as he looked down the length of flushed faces to the far end and saw the face of El-Soo, the light in his eyes flared up, and for a moment the disapproval vanished.

Place was made for him at Klakee-Nah's side, and a glass placed before him. Klakee-Nah, with his own hands, filled the glass with fervent spirits. "Drink!" he cried. "Is it not good?"

And Porportuk's eyes watered as he nodded his head and smacked his lips.

"When, in your own house, have you had such drink?" Klakee-Nah demanded.

"I will not deny that the drink is good to this old throat of mine," Porportuk made answer, and hesitated for the speech to complete the thought.

"But it costs overmuch," Klakee-Nah roared, completing it for him.

Porportuk winced at the laughter that went down the table. His eyes burned malevolently. "We were boys together, of the same age," he said. "In your throat is death. I am still alive and strong."

An ominous murmur arose from the company. Klakee-Nah coughed and strangled, and the old slaves smote him between the shoulders. He emerged gasping, and waved his hand to still the threatening rumble.

"You have grudged the very fire in your house because the wood cost overmuch!" he cried. "You have grudged life. To live cost overmuch, and you have refused to pay the price. Your life has been like a cabin where the fire is out and there are no blankets on the floor." He signaled to a slave to fill his glass, which he held aloft. "But I have lived. And I have been warm with life as you have never been warm. It is true, you shall live long. But the longest nights are the cold nights when a man shivers and lies awake. My nights have been short, but I have slept warm."

He drained the glass. The shaking hand of a slave failed to catch it as it crashed to the floor. Klakee-Nah sank back, panting, watching the upturned glasses at the lips of the drinkers, his own lips slightly smiling to the applause. At a sign, two slaves at-

tempted to help him sit upright again. But they were weak, his frame was mighty, and the four old men tottered and shook as they helped him forward.

"But manner of life is neither here nor there," he went on. "We have other business, Porportuk, you and I, tonight. Debts are mischances, and I am in mischance with you. What of my debt, and how great is it?"

Porportuk searched in his pouch and brought forth a memorandum. He sipped at his glass and began. "There is the note of August 1889 for three hundred dollars. The interest has never been paid. And the note of the next year for five hundred dollars. This note was included in the note of two months later for a thousand dollars. Then there is the note——"

"Never mind the many notes!" Klakee-Nah cried out impatiently. "They make my head go around and all the things inside my head. The whole! The round whole! How much is it?"

Porportuk referred to his memorandum. "Fifteen thousand nine hundred and sixty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents," he read with careful precision.

"Make it sixteen thousand, make it sixteen thousand," Klakee-Nah said grandly. "Odd numbers were ever a worry. And now—and it is for this that I have sent for you—make me out a new note for sixteen thousand, which I shall sign. I have no thought of the interest. Make it as large as you will, and make it payable in the next world, when I shall meet you by the fire of the Great Father of all Indians. Then the note will be paid. This I promise you. It is the word of Klakee-Nah."

Porportuk looked perplexed, and loudly the laughter arose and shook the room. Klakee-Nah raised his hands. "Nay," he cried. "It is not a joke. I but speak in fairness. It was for this I sent for you, Porportuk. Make out the note."

"I have no dealings with the next world," Porportuk made answer slowly.

"Have you no thought to meet me before the Great Father!" Klakee-Nah demanded. Then he added, "I shall surely be there."

"I have no dealings with the next world," Porportuk repeated sourly.

The dying man regarded him with frank amazement.

"I know naught of the next world," Porportuk explained. "I do business in this world."

Klakee-Nah's face cleared. "This comes of sleeping cold of night," he laughed. He pondered for a space, then said, "It is in this world that you must be paid. There remains to me this house. Take it, and burn the debt in the candle there."

"It is an old house and not worth the money," Porportuk made answer, looking straight at the old man.

"There are my mines on the Twisted Salmon."

"They have never paid to work," was the reply.

"There is my share in the steamer *Koyukuk*. I am half owner."

"She is at the bottom of the Yukon."

Klakee-Nah started. "True, I forgot. It was last spring when the ice went out." He mused for a time, while the glasses remained untasted, and all the company waited upon his utterance.

"Then it would seem I owe you a sum of money which I cannot pay . . . in this world?"

Porportuk nodded and glanced down the table.

"Then it would seem that you, Porportuk, are a poor businessman," Klakee-Nah said slyly.

And boldly Porportuk made answer, "No; there is security yet untouched."

"What!" cried Klakee-Nah. "Have I still property? Name it, and it is yours, and the debt is no more."

"There it is." Porportuk pointed at El-Soo.

Klakee-Nah could not understand. He peered down the table, brushed his eyes, and peered again.

"Your daughter El-Soo—her will I take and the debt be no more. I will burn the debt there in the candle."

Klakee-Nah's great chest began to heave. "Ho! Ho!—a joke—Ho! Ho! Ho!" he laughed homerically. "And with your cold bed and daughters old enough to be the mother of El-Soo! Ho! Ho! Ho!" He began to cough and strangle, and the old slaves smote him on the back. "Ho! Ho!" he began again, and went off into another paroxysm.

PORPORTUK waited patiently, sipping from his glass and studying the double row of faces down the board. "It is no joke," he said finally. "My speech is well meant."

Klakee-Nah sobered and looked at him, then reached for his glass, but could not touch it. A slave passed it to him, and glass and liquor he flung into the face of Porportuk.

"Turn him out!" Klakee-Nah thundered to the waiting table that strained like a pack of hounds in leash. "And roll him in the snow!"

As the mad riot swept past him and out of doors he signaled to the slaves, and the four tottering old men supported him on his feet as he met the returning revelers, upright, glass in hand, pledging them a toast to the short night when a man sleeps warm.

It did not take long to settle the estate of Klakee-Nah. Tommy, the little Englishman, clerk at the trading post, was called in by El-Soo to help. There was nothing but debts, notes overdue, mortgaged properties, and properties mortgaged but worthless. Notes and mortgages were held by Porportuk. Tommy called him a robber many times as he pondered the compounding of the interest.

"Is it a debt, Tommy?" El-Soo asked.

"It is a robbery," Tommy answered.

"Nevertheless, it is a debt," she persisted.

The winter wore away, and the early spring, and still the claims of Porportuk remained unpaid. He saw El-Soo often and explained to her at length, as he had explained to her father, the way the debt could be canceled. Also he brought with him old medicine men, who elaborated to her the everlasting damnation of her father if the debt were not paid. One day, after such an elaboration, El-Soo made final announcement to Porportuk.

"I shall tell you two things," she said. "First, I shall not be your wife. Will you remember that? Second, you shall be paid the last cent of the sixteen thousand dollars—"

"Fifteen thousand nine hundred and sixty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents," Porportuk corrected.

"My father said sixteen thousand," was her reply. "You shall be paid."

"How?"

"I know not how, but I shall find out how. Now go, and bother me no more. If you do"—she hesitated to find fitting penalty—"if you do, I shall have you rolled in the snow again as soon as the first snow flies."

This was still in the early spring, and a little later El-Soo surprised the country. Word went up and down the Yukon from Chilkoot to the Delta, and was carried from camp to camp to the farthemost camps that in June, when the first salmon ran, El-Soo, daughter of Klakee-Nah, would sell herself at public auction to satisfy the claims of Porportuk. Vain were the attempts to dissuade her. The missionary at St. George wrestled with her, but she replied:

"Only the debts to God are settled in the next world. The debts of men are of this world, and in this world are they settled."

Akoon wrestled with her, but she replied: "I do love thee, Akoon; but honor is greater than love, and who am I that I should blacken my father?" Sister Alberta journeyed all the way up from Holy Cross on the first steamer, and to no better end.

"My father wanders in the thick and endless forests," said El-Soo. "And there will he wander, with the lost souls crying, till the debt be paid. Then, and not until then, may he go on to the house of the Great Father."

"And you believe this?" Sister Alberta asked.

"I do not know," El-Soo made answer. "It was my father's belief."

Sister Alberta shrugged her shoulders incredulously.

"Who knows but that the things we believe come true?" El-Soo went on. "Why not? The next world to you may be heaven and harps . . . because you have believed heaven and harps; to my father the next world may be a large house where he will sit always at table feasting with God."

"And you?" Sister Alberta asked. "What is you next world?"

El-Soo hesitated but for a moment. "I should like a little of both," she said. "I should like to see your face as well as the face of my father."

The day of the auction came. Tanana Station was populous. As was their cus-

tom, the tribes had gathered to await the salmon run, and in the meantime spent the time in dancing and frolicking, trading and gossiping. Then there was the ordinary sprinkling of white adventurers, traders, and prospectors, and in addition a large number of white men who had come because of curiosity or interest in the affair.

It had been a backward spring, and the salmon were late in running. This delay but keyed up the interest. Then, on the day of the auction, the situation was made tense by Akoon. He arose and made public and solemn announcement that whosoever bought El-Soo would forthwith and immediately die. He flourished the Winchester in his hand to indicate the manner of the taking off. El-Soo was angered thereat; but he refused to speak with her, and went to the trading post to lay in extra ammunition.

The first salmon was caught at ten o'clock in the evening, and at midnight the auction began. It took place on top of the high bank alongside the Yukon. The sun was due north just below the horizon, and the sky was lurid red. A great crowd gathered about the table and the two chairs that stood near the edge of the bank. To the fore were many white men and several chiefs. And most prominently to the fore, rifle in hand, stood Akoon. Tommy, at El-Soo's request, served as auctioneer, but she made the opening speech and described the goods about to be sold. She was in native costume, in the dress of a chief's daughter, splendid and barbaric, and she stood on a chair, that she might be seen to advantage.

"Who will buy a wife?" she asked. "Look at me. I am twenty years old and a maid. I will be a good wife to the man who buys me. If he is a white man, I shall dress in the fashion of white women; if he is an Indian, I shall dress as"—she hesitated a moment—"a squaw. I can make my own clothes, and sew, and wash, and mend. I was taught for eight years to do these things at Holy Cross Mission. I can read and write English, and I know how to play the organ. Also I can do arithmetic and some algebra—a little. I shall be sold to the highest bidder, and to him I will make out a bill of sale of myself. I forgot to say that I can sing very well, and that I have never been sick in my life. I weigh one hundred and thirty-two pounds; my father is dead and I have no relatives. Who wants me?"

She looked over the crowd with flaming audacity and stepped down. At Tommy's request she stood upon the chair again, while he mounted the second chair and started the bidding.

Surrounding El-Soo stood the four old slaves of her father. They were age-twisted and palsied, faithful to their meat, a generation out of the past that watched unmoved the antics of younger life. In the front of the crowd were several Eldorado and Bonanza kings from the upper Yukon, and beside them, on crutches, swollen with scurvy, were two broken prospectors. From the midst of the crowd, thrust out by its own vividness, appeared the face of a wild-eyed squaw from the remote regions of the upper Tanana; a strayed Sitkan from the coast stood side side by side with a Stick from Lake Le Barge, and, beyond, a half-dozen French-Canadian voyageurs, grouped by themselves. From afar came the faint cries of myriads of wild fowl on the nesting grounds. Swallows were skimming up overhead from the placid surface of the Yukon, and robins were singing. The oblique rays of the hidden sun shot through the smoke, high-dissipated from forest fires a thousand miles away, and turned the heavens to somber red, while the earth shone red in the reflected glow. This red glow shone in the faces of all, and made everything seem unearthly and unreal.

The bidding began slowly. The Sitkan, who was a stranger in the land and who had arrived only half an hour before, offered one hundred dollars in a confident voice, and was surprised when Akoon turned threateningly upon him with the rifle. The bidding dragged. An Indian from the Tozikakat, a pilot, bid one hundred and fifty, and after some time a gambler, who had been ordered out of the upper country, raised the bid to two hundred. El-Soo was saddened; her pride was hurt; but the only effect was that she flamed more audaciously upon the crowd.

There was a disturbance among the onlookers as Porportuk forced his way to the front. "Five hundred dollars!" he bid in a loud voice, then looked about him proudly to note the effect.

He was minded to use his great wealth as a bludgeon with which to stun all competition at the start. But one of the voyageurs, looking on El-Soo with sparkling eyes, raised the bid a hundred.

"Seven hundred!" Porportuk returned promptly.

And with equal promptness came the "Eight hundred" of the voyageur.

Then Porportuk swung his club again. "Twelve hundred!" he shouted.

With a look of poignant disappointment the voyageur succumbed. There was no further bidding. Tommy worked hard but could not elicit a bid.

El-Soo spoke to Porportuk. "It were good, Porportuk, for you to weigh well your bid. Have you forgotten the thing I told you—that I would never marry you!"

"It is a public auction," he retorted. "I shall buy you with a bill of sale. I have offered twelve hundred dollars. You come cheap."

"Too damned cheap!" Tommy cried. "What if I am auctioneer? That does not prevent me from bidding. I'll make it thirteen hundred."

"Fourteen hundred," from Porportuk.

"I'll buy you in to be my—my sister," Tommy whispered to El-Soo, then called aloud, "Fifteen hundred!"

At two thousand one of the Eldorado kings took a hand, and Tommy dropped out.

A third time Porportuk swung the club of his wealth, making a clean raise of five hundred dollars. But the Eldorado king's pride was touched. No man could club him. And he swung back another five hundred.

El-Soo stood at three thousand. Porportuk made it thirty-five hundred, and gasped when the Eldorado king raised it a thousand dollars. Porportuk raised it five hundred, and again gasped when the king raised a thousand more.

Porportuk became angry. His pride was touched; his strength was challenged, and with him strength took the form of wealth. He would not be ashamed for weakness before the world. El-Soo became incidental. The savings and scrimpings from the cold nights of all his years were ripe to be squandered. El-Soo stood at six thousand. He made it seven thousand. And then, in thousand-dollar bids, as fast as they could be uttered, her price went up. At fourteen thousand the two men stopped for breath.

Then the unexpected happened. A still heavier club was swung. In the pause that ensued the gambler, who had scented a speculation and formed a syndicate with several of his fellows, bid sixteen thousand dollars.

"Seventeen thousand," Porportuk said weakly.

"Eighteen thousand," said the king.

Porportuk gathered his strength. "Twenty thousand."

The syndicate dropped out. The Eldorado king raised a thousand, and Porportuk raised back; and as they bid, Akoon turned from one to the other, half menacingly, half curiously, as though to see what manner of man it was that he would have to kill. When the king prepared to make his next bid, Akoon having pressed closer, the king first loosed the revolver at his hip, then said:

"Twenty-three thousand."

"Twenty-four thousand," said Porportuk. He grinned viciously, for the certitude of his bidding had at last shaken the king. The latter moved over close to El-Soo. He studied her carefully for a long while.

"And five hundred," he said at last.

"Twenty-five thousand," came Porportuk's raise.

The king looked for a long space and shook his head. He looked again and said reluctantly, "And five hundred."

"Twenty-six thousand," Porportuk snapped.

The king shook his head and refused to meet Tommy's pleading eye. In the meantime Akoon had edged close to Porportuk. El-Soo's quick eye noted this, and while Tommy wrestled with the Eldorado king for another bid she bent and spoke in a low voice in the ear of a slave,

And while Tommy's "Going . . . going . . . going" dominated the air, the slave went up to Akoon and spoke in a low voice in his ear. Akoon made no sign that he had heard, though El-Soo watched him anxiously.

"Gone!" Tommy's voice rang out. "To Porportuk, for twenty-six thousand dollars."

Porportuk glanced uneasily at Akoon. All eyes were centered upon Akoon, but he did nothing.

"Let the scales be brought," said El-Soo.

"I shall make payment at my house," said Porportuk.

"Let the scales be brought," El-Soo repeated. "Payment shall be made here where all can see."

So the gold scales were brought from the trading post, while Porportuk went away and came back with a man at his heels, on whose shoulders was a weight of gold dust in moose-hide sacks. Also, at Porportuk's back walked another man with a rifle, who had eyes only for Akoon.

"Here are the notes and mortgages," said Porportuk, "for fifteen thousand nine hundred and sixty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents."

El-Soo received them into her hands and said to Tommy, "Let them be reckoned as sixteen thousand."

"There remains ten thousand dollars to be paid in gold," Tommy said.

Porportuk nodded and untied the mouths of the sacks. El-Soo, standing at the edge of the bank, tore the papers to shreds and sent them fluttering out over the Yukon. The weighing began, but halted.

"Of course, at seventeen dollars," Porportuk had said to Tommy as he adjusted the scales.

"At sixteen dollars," El-Soo said sharply.

"It is the custom of all the land to reckon gold at seventeen dollars for each ounce," Porportuk replied. "And this is a business transaction."

EL-SOO LAUGHED. "It is a new custom," she said. "It began this spring. Last year, and the years before, it was sixteen dollars an ounce. When my father's debt was made it was sixteen dollars. When he spent at the store the money he got from you, for one ounce he was given sixteen dollars' worth of flour, not seventeen. Wherefore shall you pay for me at sixteen and not at seventeen." Porportuk grunted and allowed the weighing to proceed.

"Weigh it in three piles, Tommy," she said. "A thousand dollars here, three thousand here, and here six thousand."

It was slow work, and while the weighing went on Akoon was closely watched by all.

"He but waits till the money is paid," one said; and the word went around and was accepted, and they waited for what Akoon should do when the money was paid. And Porportuk's man with the rifle waited and watched Akoon.

The weighing was finished, and the gold dust lay on the table in three dark yellow heaps. "There is a debt of my father to the company for three thousand dollars," said El-Soo. "Take it, Tommy, for the company. And here are four old men, Tommy. You know them. And here is one thousand dollars. Take it, and see that the old men are never hungry and never without tobacco."

Tommy scooped the gold into separate sacks. Six thousand dollars remained on the table. El-Soo thrust the scoop into the heap and with a sudden turn whirled the contents out and down to the Yukon in a golden shower. Porportuk seized her wrist as she thrust the scoop a second time into the heap.

"It is mine," she said clamly. Porportuk released his grip, but he gritted his teeth and scowled darkly as she continued to scoop the gold into the river till none was left.

The crowd had eyes for naught but Akoon, and the rifle of Porportuk's man lay across the hollow of his arm, the muzzle directed at Akoon a yard away, the man's thumb on the hammer. But Akoon did nothing.

"Make out the bill of sale," Porportuk said grimly.

And Tommy made out the bill of sale, wherein all right and title in the woman El-Soo was vested in the man Porportuk. El-Soo signed the document, and Porportuk

folded it and put in away in his pouch. Suddenly his eyes flashed, and in sudden speech he addressed El-Soo.

"But it was not your father's debt," he said. "What I paid was the price for you. Your sale is business of today and not of last year and the years before. The ounces paid for you will buy at the post today seventeen dollars of flour, and not sixteen. I have lost a dollar on each ounce. I have lost six hundred and twenty-five dollars."

El-Soo thought for a moment, and saw the error she had made. She smiled, and then she laughed.

"You are right," she laughed. "I made a mistake. But it is too late. You have paid, and the gold is gone. You did not think quick. It is your loss. Your wit is slow these days, Porportuk. You are getting old."

He did not answer. He glanced uneasily at Akoon and was reassured. His lips tightened, and a hint of cruelty came into his face. "Come," he said, "we will go to my house."

"Do you remember the two things I told you in the spring?" El-Soo asked, making no movement to accompany him.

"My head would be full with the things women say, did I heed them," he answered.

"I told you that you would be paid," El-Soo went on carefully. "And I told you that I would never be your wife."

"But that was before the bill of sale." Porportuk crackled the paper between his fingers inside the pouch. "I have bought you before all the world. You belong to me. You will not deny that you belong to me."

"I belong to you," El-Soo said steadily.

"I own you."

"You own me."

Porportuk's voice rose slightly and triumphantly. "As a dog, I own you."

"As a dog, you own me," El-Soo continued calmly. "But, Porportuk, you forget the thing I told you. Had any other man bought me, I should have been that man's wife. I should have been a good wife to that man. Such was my will. But my will with you was that I should never be your wife. Wherefore, I am your dog."

Porportuk knew that he played with fire, and he resolved to play firmly. "Then I speak to you not as El-Soo but as a dog," he said; "and I tell you to come with me." He half reached to grip her arm, but with a gesture she held him back.

"Not so fast, Porportuk. You buy a dog. The dog runs away. It is your loss. I am your dog. What if I run away?"

"As the owner of the dog, I shall beat you—"

"When you catch me?"

"When I catch you."

"Then catch me."

He reached swiftly for her, but she eluded him. She laughed as she circled around the table. "Catch her!" Porportuk commanded the Indian with the rifle, who stood near to her. But as the Indian stretched forth his arm to her the Eldorado king felled him with a fist blow under the ear. The rifle clattered to the ground. Then was Akoon's chance. His eyes glittered, but he did nothing.

Porportuk was an old man, but his cold nights retained for him his activity. He did not circle the table. He came across suddenly, over the top of the table. El-Soo was taken off her guard. She sprang back with a sharp cry of alarm, and Porportuk would have caught her had it not been for Tommy. Tommy's leg went out. Porportuk tripped and pitched forward on the ground. El-Soo got her start.

"Then catch me," she laughed over her shoulder as she fled away.

She ran lightly and easily, but Porportuk ran swiftly and savagely. He outran her. In his youth he had been swiftest of all the young men. But El-Soo dodged in a willowy, elusive way. Being in native dress, her feet were not cluttered with skirts, and her pliant body curved a flight that defined the gripping fingers of Porportuk.

With laughter and tumult the great crowd scattered out to see the chase. It led through the Indian encampment; and ever dodging, circling, and reversing, El-Soo and Porportuk appeared and disappeared among the tents. El-Soo seemed to balance herself against the air with her arms, now one side, now on the other, and sometimes her body, too, leaned out upon the air far from the perpendicular as she

achieved her sharpest curves. And Porportuk, always a leap behind, or a leap this side or that, like a lean hound strained after her.

They crossed the open ground beyond the encampment and disappeared in the forest. Tanana Station waited their reappearance, and long and vainly it waited.

IN the meantime Akoon ate and slept, and lingered much at the steamboat landing, deaf to the rising resentment of Tanana Station in that he did nothing. Twenty-four hours later Porportuk returned. He was tired and savage. He spoke to no one but Akoon, and with him tried to pick a quarrel. But Akoon shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Porportuk did not waste time. He outfitted half a dozen of the young men, selecting the best trackers and travelers, and at their head plunged into the forest.

Next day the steamer *Seattle,* bound upriver, pulled in to the shore and wooded up. When the lines were cast off and she churned out from the bank Akoon was on board in the pilothouse. Not many hours afterward, when it was his turn at the wheel, he saw a small birchbark canoe put off from the shore. There was only one person in it. He studied it carefully, put the wheel over, and slowed down.

The captain entered the pilothouse.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "The water's good."

Akoon grunted. He saw a larger canoe leaving the bank, and in it were a number of persons. As the *Seattle* lost headway he put the wheel over some more.

The captain fumed. "It's only a squaw," he protested.

Akoon did not grunt. He was all eyes for the squaw and the pursuing canoe. In the latter six paddles were flashing, while the squaw paddled slowly.

"You'll be aground," the captain protested, seizing the wheel.

But Akoon countered his strength on the wheel and looked him in the eyes. The captain slowly released the spokes.

"Queer beggar," he sniffed to himself.

Akoon held the *Seattle* on the edge of the shoal water and waited till he saw the squaw's fingers clutch the forward rail. Then he signaled for full speed ahead and ground the wheel over. The large canoe was very near, but the gap between it and the steamer was widening.

The squaw laughed and leaned over the rail. "Then catch me, Porportuk!" she cried.

Akoon left the steamer at Fort Yukon. He outfitted a small poling boat and went up the Porcupine River. And with him went El-Soo. It was a weary journey, and the way led across the backbone of the world; but Akoon had traveled it before. When they came to the head waters of the Porcupine they left the boat and went on foot across the Rocky Mountains.

Akoon greatly liked to walk behind El-Soo and watch the movement of her. There was a music in it that he loved. And especially he loved the well-rounded calves in their sheaths of soft-tanned leather, the slim ankles, and the small moccasined feet that were tireless through the longest days.

"You are light as air," he said, looking up at her. "It is no labor for you to walk. You almost float, so lightly do your feet rise and fall. You are like a deer, El-Soo; you are like a deer, and your eyes are like deer's eyes, sometimes when you look at me, or when you hear a quick sound and wonder if it be danger that stirs. Yours eyes are like a deer's eyes now as you look at me."

And El-Soo, luminous and melting, bent and kissed Akoon.

"When we reach the Mackenzie we will not delay," Akoon said later. "We will go south before the winter catches us. We will go to the sun lands where there is no snow. But we will return. I have seen much of the world, and there is no land like Alaska, no sun like our sun, and the snow is good after the long summer."

"And you will learn to read," said El-Soo.

And Akoon said, "I will surely learn to read."

But there was delay when they reached the Mackenzie. They fell in with a band of Mackenzie Indians and, hunting, Akoon was shot by accident. The rifle was in the hands of a youth. The bullet broke Akoon's right arm and, ranging farther, broke two of his ribs. Akoon knew rough surgery,

while El-Soo had learned some refinements at Holy Cross. The bones were finally set, and Akoon lay by the fire for them to knit. Also he lay by the fire so that the smoke would keep the mosquitoes away.

Then it was that Porportuk, with his six young men, arrived. Akoon groaned in his helplessness and made appeal to the Mackenzies. But Porportuk made demand, and the Mackenzies were perplexed. Porportuk was for seizing upon El-Soo, but this they would not permit. Judgment must be given, and, as it was an affair of man and woman, the council of the old men was called—this that warm judgment might not be given by the young men, who were warm of heart.

The old men sat in a circle about the smudge fire. Their faces were lean and wrinkled, and they gasped and panted for air. The smoke was not good for them. Occasionally they struck with withered hands at the mosquitoes that braved the smoke. After such exertion they coughed hollowly and painfully. Some spat blood, and one of them sat a bit apart with head bowed forward, and bled slowly and continuously at the mouth; the coughing sickness had gripped them. They were as dead men; their time was short. It was a judgment of the dead.

"And I paid for her a heavy price," Porportuk concluded his complaint. "Such a price you have never seen. Sell all that is yours—sell your spears and arrows and rifles, sell your skins and furs, sell your tents and boats and dogs, sell everything, and you will not have maybe a thousand dollars. Yet did I pay for the woman, El-Soo, twenty-six times the price of all your spears and arrows and rifles, your skins and furs, your tents and boats and dogs. It was a heavy price."

The old men nodded gravely, though their wizened eye slits widened with wonder that any woman should be worth such a price. The one that bled at the mouth wiped his lips. "Is it true talk?" he asked each of Porportuk's six young men. And each answered that it was true.

"Is it true talk?" he asked El-Soo, and she answered, "It is true."

"But Porportuk has not told that he is an old man," Akoon said, "and that he has daughters older than El-Soo."

"It is true, Porportuk is an old man," said El-Soo.

"It is for Porportuk to measure the strength of his age," said he who bled at the mouth. "We be old men. Behold! Age is never so old as youth would measure it."

And the circle of old men champed their gums, and nodded approvingly, and coughed.

"I told him that I would never be his wife," said El-Soo.

"Yet you took from him twenty-six times all that we possess?" asked a one-eyed old man.

El-Soo was silent.

"Is it true?" And his one eye burned and bored into her like a fiery gimlet.

"It is true," she said.

"But I will run away again," she broke out passionately a moment later. "Always will I run away."

"That is for Porportuk to consider," said another of the old men. "It is for us to consider the judgment."

"What price did you pay for her?" was demanded of Akoon.

"No price did I pay for her," he answered. "She was above price. I did not measure her in gold dust, nor in dogs and tents and furs."

The old men debated among themselves and mumbled in undertones. "These old men are ice," Akoon said in English. "I will not listen to their judgment, Porportuk. If you take El-Soo, I will surely kill you."

THE OLD MEN ceased and regarded him suspiciously. "We do not know the speech you make," one said.

"He but said that he would kill me," Porportuk volunteered. "So it were well to take from him his rifle, and to have some of your young men sit by him, that he may not do me hurt. He is a young man, and what are broken bones to youth!"

Akoon, lying helpless, had rifle and knife taken from him, and to either side of his shoulders sat young men of the Mackenzies. The one-eyed old man arose and stood upright. "We marvel at the price paid for one mere woman," he began; "but the wisdom of the price is no concern of ours.

We are here to give judgment, and judgment we give. We have no doubt. It is known to all that Porportuk paid a heavy price for the woman El-Soo. Wherefore does the woman El-Soo belong to Porportuk and none other." He sat down heavily and coughed. The old men nodded and coughed.

"I will kill you," Akoon cried in English.

Porportuk smiled and stood up. "You have given true judgment," he said to the council, "and my young men will give to you much tobacco. Now let the woman be brought to me."

Akoon gritted his teeth. The young men took El-Soo by the arms. She did not resist, and was led, her face a sullen flame, to Porportuk.

"Sit there at my feet till I have made my talk," he commanded. He paused a moment. "It is true," he said, "I am an old man. Yet can I understand the ways of youth. The fire has not all gone out of me. Yet am I no longer young, nor am I minded to run these old legs of mine through all the years that remain to me. El-Soo can run fast and well. She is a deer. This I know, for I have seen and run after her. It is not good that a wife should run so fast. I paid for her a heavy price, yet does she run away from me. Akoon paid no price at all, yet does she run to him.

"When I came among you people of the Mackenzie, I was of one mind. As I listened in the council and thought of the swift legs of El-Soo, I was of many minds. Now am I of one mind again, but it is a different mind from the one I brought to the council. Let me tell you my mind. When a dog runs once away from a master, it will run away again. No matter how many times it is brought back, each time it will run away again. When we have such dogs we sell them. El-Soo is like a dog that runs away. I will sell her. Is there any man of the council that will buy?"

The old men coughed and remained silent.

"Akoon would buy," Porportuk went on, "but he has no money. Wherefore I will give El-Soo to him, as he said, without price. Even now will I give her to him."

LEVEL BEST

During the winter months, the snow of the Arctic is so dry that you can walk all day in moccosins without having them get wet. It is only in the fall and spring that the snow is soggy. Shoe-pacs, with rubber soles and leather uppers, then are used instead of moccasins. Eskimos, of course, have their own special hand-made footgear.

Reaching down, he took El-Soo by the hand and led her across the space to where Akoon lay on his back.

"She has a bad habit, Akoon," he said, seating her at Akoon's feet. "As she has run away from me in the past, in the days to come she may run away from you. But there is no need to fear that she will ever run away, Akoon. I shall see to that. Never will she run away from you—this the word of Porportuk. She has great wit. I know, for often has it bitten into me. Yet am I minded myself to give my wit play for once. And by my wit will I secure her to you, Akoon."

Stooping, Porportuk crossed El-Soo's feet, so that the instep of one lay over that of the other; and then, before his purpose could be divined, he discharged his rifle through the two ankles. As Akoon struggled to rise against the weight of the young men there was heard the crunch of the broken bone rebroken.

"It is just," said the old men, one to another.

El-Soo made no sound. She sat and looked at her shattered ankles, on which she would never walk again.

"My legs are strong, El-Soo," Akoon said. "But never will they bear me away from you."

El-Soo looked at him, and for the first time in all the time he had known her Akoon saw tears in her eyes.

"Your eyes are like deer's eyes, El-Soo," he said.

"Is it just?" Porportuk asked, and grinned from the edge of the smoke as he prepared to depart.

"It is just," the old men said. And they sat on in the silence.

The Cremation of Sam McGee

By ROBERT SERVICE

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and blows.
Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only knows.
He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell;
Though he'd often say in his homely way that "he'd sooner live in hell."

On a Christmas Day we were mushing our way over the Dawson trail.
Talk of your cold! through the parka's fold it stabbed like a driven nail.
If our eyes we'd close, then the lashes froze till sometimes we couldn't see;
It wasn't much fun, but the only one to whimper was Sam McGee.

And that very night, as we lay packed tight in our robes beneath the snow,
And the dogs were fed, and the stars o'erhead were dancing heel and toe,
He turned to me, and "Cap," says he, "I'll cash in this trip, I guess;
And if I do, I'm asking that you won't refuse my last request."

Well, he seemed so low that I couldn't say no; then he says with a sort of moan:
"It's the cursed cold, and it's got right hold till I'm chilled clean through to the bone.
Yet 'tain't being dead—it's my awful dread of the icy grave that pains;
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate my last remains."

A pal's last need is a thing to heed, so I swore I would not fail;
And we started on at the streak of dawn; but God! he looked ghastly pale.
He crouched on the sleigh, and he raved all day of his home in Tennessee;
And before nightfall a corpse was all that was left of Sam McGee.

There wasn't a breath in that land of death, and I hurried, horror-driven,
With a corpse half hid that I couldn't get rid, because of a promise given;
It was lashed to the sleigh, and it seemed to say: "You may tax your brawn and brain,
But you promised true, and it's up to you to cremate those last remains."

Now a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code.
In the days to come, though my lips were dumb, in my heart how I cursed that load.
In the long, long night, by the lone firelight, while the huskies, round in a ring,
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows—O God! how I loathed the thing.

And every day that quiet clay seemed to heavy and heavier grow;
And on I went, though the dogs were spent and the grub was getting low;
The trail was bad, and I felt half mad, but I swore I would not give in;
And I'd often sing to the hateful thing, and it hearkened with a grin.

Till I came to the marge of Lake Lebarge, and a derelict there lay;
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice it was called the "Alice May."
And I looked at it, and I thought a bit, and I looked at my frozen chum;
Then "Here," said I, with a sudden cry, "is my cre-ma-tor-eum."

Some planks I tore from the cabin floor, and I lit the boiler fire;
Some coal I found that was lying around, and I heaped the fuel higher;
The flames just soared, and the furnace roared—such a blaze you seldom see;
And I burrowed a hole in the glowing coal, and I stuffed in Sam McGee.

Then I made a hike, for I didn't like to hear him sizzle so;
And the heavens scowled, and the huskies howled, and the wind began to blow.
It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks, and I don't know why;
And the greasy smoke in an inky cloak went streaking down the sky.

I do not know how long in the snow I wrestled with grisly fear;
But the stars came out and they danced about ere again I ventured near;
I was sick with dread, but I bravely said: "I'll just take a peep inside.
I guess he's cooked, and it's time I looked," . . . then the door I opened wide.

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of the furnace roar;
And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and he said: "Please close that door.
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold and storm—
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm."

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By the men who moil for gold;
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Thickest Head In Koyokuk

By ROBT. R. RICHARDS

Pity the man who tries to fathom the sly workings of the female mind. Bury him forthwith, he who's an old Scandinavian sourdough trying the trick here in this strange new Arctic land where one woman is worth ten gold mines.

JAN TENIKEN packed the pot bellied stove until the flames licked through the grate like grasping red and yellow fingers. As he listened to the snap and crackle of the fire he frowned.

The silence had become so overwhelming even the sound of the fire was not enough to break it. Jan told himself that he built a roaring inferno to drive out the dampness and cold. But there was no longer dampness or cold to drive out in the smallness of his already overheated spruce bough cabin.

Each winter he spent in the Arctic had found him building fires that would spit and sputter until they sounded like gunshots. Only yesterday he had poured enough coal oil on the willow twigs to heat an entire Eskimo village. Once he had even dropped a bullet into the flames just to hear the explosive noise of ignited powder.

And there was the time his caribou skin rug had been caught by the dancing flames, almost burning his cabin to the ground. Jan smothered it with blankets and frantic shovel loads of snow.

The damage to the inside of his cabin had been considerable. At night when he stretched out on his bunk a great peacefulness came over him after the excitement of the fire. The hours he passed battling the flames had gone quicker than any he had known. New skins would have to be added to those which were destroyed. New timber would have to be cut and shaved to replace the charred floor boards. Jan took his time about fixing the damage. When all was replaced there would be nothing for him to do.

He did little through the winter. It was during the summer that he lived. As he thought of the spring breakup and the warmth of the summer sun he was more acutely aware than ever of the long winter that lay before him. The frost had come with unexpected swiftness this year. For Jan it meant more than the close of a season. The sudden winter had frozen Maddox Creek. A few days before the cold set in he had discovered gold in the creek.

Jan never said a word about his lucky find. The sourdoughs would pan all over Maddox Creek like flies once it was known. Teniken had sworn himself to secrecy until he worked the creek for all it was worth. There were times when he thought he would burst with his secret. But he was able to contain himself. Since he had arrived from the old country he was known as a man of spare speech who kept away from others.

He stared at the flames. As the embers began to die he yawned. He brewed a cup of tea. He drank it slowly. He waited for the effect of its warmth and stretched out on his bunk.

As Jan watched the last branch burn to ashes he thought of Helga. His wife had not been able to take the north and its silence. She was a city girl. He never should have brought her to the Koyokuk. Always she wanted to dance. The roadhouse in Polar Bottom had been neither large nor bright enough for her.

HE THOUGHT of the day she departed. She sang one of those cowboy tunes Jan could never remember. The sourdoughs went crazy when they heard her husky voice. When Helga left for Nome she said bitterly, "I'll make enough money to go back to the old country and live like a queen." Jan was happy to be rid of her. When he returned to the quiet of his cabin it was with relief.

But the Koyokuk did things to a man

who lived by himself. Loneliness turned in on him like an enemy. That first winter he longed for the ceaseless scratchiness of her phonograph and its sharp records. He longed for them as much as he hated them in the past.

As he lay in the darkness he heard a sound outside the cabin. A rustling. Footsteps in the snow. Perhaps a snow-shoe rabbit. He listened carefully. There was a tapping on the door. Jan's heart quickened. He was half way between Maddox Creek and Polar Bottom. At this time of the year nobody followed the winter trail. For the winter trail was a joke. It was almost as easy to scoop out a new one.

As Jan moved towards the door he heard a voice. He opened it and an old man stamped in with a flurry of snow. "Howdy!" Flinty Morrow greeted him. His beard glistened with frost and his eyelashes were flecked with ice.

"She's colder than an iced rattler." the old sourdough commented without complaint. Jan Teniken studied him for a moment "Where did you come from?"

"Oh, sold myself a mess of furs this mornin' at Little Bear." Flinty stamped the circulation back into his feet. Jan did some calculating. Little Bear was forty miles east. The sourdough must have whipped his dogs to a lather.

"You got good strong team, uh?" Jan asked.

Flinty grinned at the younger man. He saw the quizzical grey eyes beneath the faded blond hair. The small tight chin. He noted the peculiar off-tone quality of Teniken's voice. Men who lived alone talked this way. Men who did not speak for weeks or even months at a time.

"I don't have no team." Flinty said.

"You make forty mile by foot?" Jan was amazed.

"Yup, muklucks and snowshoes all the way from Little Bear." the old sourdough cast an interested eye at the tea kettle. Jan moved to the stove. "I'll thank ye

for some." Flinty said.

"Where I come from you never make forty mile in one day." Jan said.

"Yeah, well that may be." Flinty grumbled. Then his watery eyes took in the cabin. "Got a right cozy place here."

"Best in Koyokuk. I build myself." Teniken spoke with pride.

"We all build our own." Flinty thumbed through a packet of tobacco. There was an unpleasant silence. "Jes let me finish my chew and I'll be off." he said.

Jan offered lodging for the night.

"I ain't too old for the trail." Flinty displayed a near toothless grin. "Why I knowed old Jed Hopper. He came clear through the Koyokuk during the breakup. Half of Polar Bottom give him up for dead."

Jan's face jutted forward, "I cross Koyokuk twice during breakup." The old sourdough's eyes glistened. He looked like a man receiving his fourth ace. "Didja haul a sick dog and a dead man in a basket sled?" he asked.

Jan shook his head negatively.

"Well," Flinty drew a long breath, this here Jed Hopper, eighty-one if he wuz a day mindya, drugged not one but two dead men and a sick malemute clear down the Koyokuk.

Jan Teniken wore a puzzled frown. Flinty Morrow had come to the Koyokuk a long time ago. He told bigger stories than the ones that were told in the old country. At first he doubted the sourdough. But he was seeing for himself now how the old man was heading through the region in the dead of winter with barely a stop.

Flinty Morrow got to his feet, "But I didn't come to tell about Jed Hopper. I'm figurin' on rentin' your dogs. Got business in Polar Bottom. Wanna get there right quick."

They discussed the dogs and agreed upon a price. Flinty slipped back into his parka. Jan asked him to stay once again. For Jan realized now that not one man in the Koyokuk had ever accepted a night's lodging from him. Teniken insisted upon it. But the other man was just as adamant in his refusal.

As the old sourdough moved towards the door he said, "There's gonna be a big thanksgivin' feast at Ed Nolan's. Nita will be there." Jan Teniken's jaw tightened. The mention of her name affected him strongly.

But he prided himself on not revealing this to Flinty. "If I take wife again I take Nita." Jan said. The old sourdough chuckled, "Got it all arranged huh?" Jan Teniken flushed. He did not like Flinty's humor.

"Why not she marry me?" he challenged. "I best hunter, fisher, trapper, miner and man on trail in all Koyokuk." he declared sullenly. "I already speak to Keeka, father of Nita. Just like we do in the old country. He say okay Jan. Marry girl."

Flinty leaned towards the stove. He spat a contemptuous stream of tobacco juice through the grate. "This ain't the old country Teniken. This is Alaska. The newest country in the world. Even the Eskimos know that by now. Be good fer yer to remember that, Teniken."

The men shook hands but there was no warmth in their grips. "I see you Thanksgivin'." Jan said. "Yup, and don't forget to make me best man." the old sourdough departed with a laugh. Jan listened for the sound of fading footsteps in the snow. The sense of loneliness began to grip him again. It was like an invisible hand with steel strength and padded claws.

He tried not to think about it. But as he retired to his bunk it wrapped around him like a shroud. Only the thought of the gold he had discovered on Maddox Creek broke its spell. He chuckled as he pictured the envy of the sourdoughs when they learned of it. As he rolled beneath the blankets his heart became suddenly heavy. He recalled the sound of the old sourdough's voice. He remembered Flinty Morrow's drawl. It seemed that people from certain states spoke that way. He recalled the brief conversation word for word. He repeated aloud what Flinty Morrow had said to him and what he had said in return. He tried to imitate the sourdough's drawl.

His eyes closed but he did not sleep well. Jan arose at dawn. He saw the first glimmer of greyish light peeping over

the horizon in the east. Suddenly he moved towards his sled and attached the tandem to a lone dog. Flinty had a start of some five hours on him. The old sourdough had two dogs to his one. Polar Bottom was seventy-five miles away. The trail was one of the worst in the region. It would take the old sourdough four days to complete it.

Jan reckoned that he could make it in three.

He'd give Polar Bottom something to talk about. He would show them how a man from the old country knew more than the sourdoughs. He gobbled a mouthful of half cooked bacon and washed it down with strong tea. He took no time to leave his cabin in order. In a few moments he packed the sled and was on the trail. The runners slid easily over the hard packed snow. The husky trotted quickly and his breath formed a stream of vapor which stretched from his mouth like a pennant.

Jan Teniken felt a sense of triumph as he whirled past spruce and birch and pine. He was the greatest man in the Koyokuk. By the end of summer he would be the richest. He would marry the pretty Nita and his loneliness would melt away. Jan saw two sunsets before he reached the roadhouse of Wanika.

The solemn Indian came from his cabin to greet him. Jan saw the wrinkled prune face that was never known to smile. "You come down trail right time," Wanika said, "big wind come in few days and freeze all." Jan Teniken had other things on his mind. "Have you seen Flinty Morrow?" The gaunt Indian pointed a finger towards the inside of the cabin. "Old man sleep."

Jan nodded with satisfaction. He had overtaken Flinty. If he stayed on the trail all night he would be in Polar Bottom before noon.

It would give them something to talk about at the Thanksgiving dinner. Jan returned to his sled. He was tired. His legs and his back ached. By all the laws of reason he should rest at Wanika's. But a man who wants to prove his worth cannot always bother with reason and laws. During the night he could make a few short stops on the trail. He knew only that he must get to Polar Bottom before the old sourdough.

Jan felt dizzy from lack of sleep when he passed the first cabin in Polar Bottom. The thought of relating his tale, of getting the jump on Flinty, filled him with new energy. As he came to Ed Nolan's he saw the boys standing on the porch. They listened with interest to his story. "Old sourdough have much red face on Thanksgiving." Jan smiled. "Yeah, if you don't have one first." one of them said. The man broke into a ring of laughter. Jan didn't understand the joke. As he turned to leave he saw Flinty Morrow appear from the dance hall. He looked at the old man in astonishment and Flinty read the question in Jan's eyes. "I took the summer trail. Its a heck of a lot shorter." Flinty winked at the men and left Jan at their mercy.

NITA was the daughter of Keeka and she came only to the shoulders of the shortest man in the Koyokuk. And yet in whatever room she entered and whatever company she found herself in, Nita always appeared to be the largest person present.

Maybe it was her abandoned laughter, her good nature that drew Jan Teniken to her. Maybe it was her pretty face. From her father, Keeka, she had inherited a smile like a string of pearls and hair the color of anthracite. Her mother, "Danish" Olga had bequeathed her skin of pure cream.

Jan Teniken could not remove his eyes from her as they sat at the Thanksgiving table.

The heavy fat face of Ed Nolan kept turning towards Nita too. He handled the carving knife like a butcher and the guests were amused. Nita took the knife from his clumsy hands and proceeded with the carving. "This year I'll do it perfectly." she smiled.

"After a year of watching operations you must be an expert." Ed Nolan jibed. At the far end of the table there sat a glum-faced Eskimo. He appeared more perplexed than anything else. It was difficult to tell his age except that he was no longer young. His eyes were nearly lost in his leathery face.

He looked at the various guests as though searching for someone. Keeka watched his daughter maneuver the cutting of roast goose with deft strokes. As he glanced at her he was both proud and confused. The child of an Eskimo had become a nurse. The government school in Fairbanks had graduated her with honors.

After prayers were said Ed Nolan turned to Flinty Morrow, "Weather's been awful tame lately." The old sourdough nodded, "Reminds me of '87. None of you folks was up here then. But it was the same way at Thanksgiving. Then zingo! She switched overnight and darn near blew all of us clear out to the Bering."

Jan Teniken listened with interest. Then he cleared his throat and spoke. "This will be a mild winter," he said, "I know all the signs from the old country."

"When you've been twenty years in the Koyokuk like me you'll know better than to say that." Flinty remarked. Jan looked up and he saw hostility in Ed Nolan's bulging eyes. "In Finland, we did not even wear shirts in weather like this." Jan spoke generally to the guests. The hoarse voice of Ed Nolan followed quickly. "Maybe they don't have no dough over there to buy any shirts with!" he roared.

Jan continued eating in silence. He was ill at ease in the presence of so many people after his year of isolation. When it was time to dance and the feast had ended he withdrew to a chair against the wall. His grey eyes kept stopping at Nita. She did not return his glances. She wasn't very friendly this year. Jan knew that the nursing school was not a good thing. He spoke to Keeka of this and the Eskimo agreed with him.

He only danced once with Nita before Ed Nolan cut in. Jan disliked Nolan. The raw, porky face. The smile that could twist into a sneer without notice. The back slapping hands that could curl into fists that broke bones and blackened eyes. Nolan shoved in front of him many times. Anger was rising slowly in Jan.

Slim Fogarty's lean fingers tinkled over the piano for a square dance. Jan touched hands with Nita. Her fingers were soft and warm in his. "You supposed dance with me." he said angrily. Nita laughed. No, this was not the girl of a year ago. The government school had made her bold before men.

Jan didn't like this. He recalled his first wife. She was from the city and she had learned boldness there. It wasn't right for a woman to laugh in the face of the man who was to be her husband. The square dances and the reels took up much time. It was late. And Jan didn't have a chance to speak with Nita alone. It wasn't until some of the guests had left and Nolan had drunk himself into a semi-stupor that Jan spoke.

They stood in the flickering light of a kerosene lamp. Jan's voice trembled when he said, "I have had a good season. I can build a large cabin. Most beautiful in all Koyokuk." He waited for Nita's dark eyes to sparkle but there was no sparkle. She looked at him and was silent.

"I am good man. Hard worker. I am not like Nolan. I have respect for woman." He could see something like sympathy creep into her pretty face. Then Nita frowned, "Jan Teniken what are you trying to tell me? She said with annoyance.

Jan smiled broadly. She knew. She wanted him to be direct. He stood before her. His feet planted firmly apart. His shoulders thrown back. He would show that he was a proud man and would make a good husband.

"I marry you tomorrow. I go build large cabin. We be happy together." he declared.

"I do not wish to marry you." she turned away. Jan stared. He stepped after her and protested. Always he had known that Nita would be his wife. And now she refused. It was the city that had poisoned her. The government school that had destroyed her.

"You must marry me." Jan demanded, "I have asked Keeka. And Keeka say yes. You cannot refuse your father's wishes."

The dark eyes glittered with fury. "I am not a girl from an igloo," she said angrily, "If you wish to marry me do not ask Keeka." Her voice was sharp and it carried. Slim Fogarty looked up from the piano and smiled. Nolan swayed across

the dance floor. He wanted to know what was going on.

Nolan turned on Jan. "You got your nerve. If she don't wanna marry you beat it! Savvy?" Nolan's coarse fingers dug like talons into Jan's broad shoulders. Jan swung wildly at Nolan and sent him crashing against the wall. They called Nolan the bear of the Koyokuk. Many a sourdough stayed away from him. But Jan had challenged and he was happy. All of Polar Bottom would see the courage of Jan Teniken tonight. And Nita would see that he was braver than Ed Nolan.

NOLAN moved towards the piano. He ripped his woolen shirt from his hairy chest and flung it to Slim Fogarty. "Play the funeral march, Slim," he shouted, "this monkey wants his mukluks punched through his ears!"

The guests stepped away from the two men. One tall and hard and blond. The other thick and furious like a beefy bull. Nolan's left arm jutted out and his knotted fist rose like a veined rock before Jan's eyes. Jan lunged. He knew Nolan was fat and slow and drunk besides. But every time he tossed a blow Nolan wasn't there. The heavy set Nolan, for all his clumsiness, knew how to shift and sway and dance on his toes. His arms formed confusing circles as they waved before Teniken's eyes. Jan heard the tittering of the sourdoughs.

Jan tried again with angry swings, but Nolan's fists raked him painfully. Jan felt his lips split apart and the blood ooze warmly down his chin.

The room grew stifling hot. The logs streaked crazily in and out of each other on the walls. Wherever he moved the crash of Nolan's fists greeted him. He heard Nolan's breath coming in gasps. But the fists did not stop hammering. Nolan tore forward in an effort to end everything with a final smash. Instinct told Jan to jump away.

Nolan crashed into the piano and Jan was at him in a flash. When he stepped back the hairy chest and porky face of Nolan were against the floor boards. Jan turned from the loud voices and looked for Nita. Both she and Keeka were gone.

As he stepped towards the door he heard the howling of the wind. Flinty Morrow barred his path, "Where you headin', Teniken?"

Jan said he was returning to his cabin.

"She's fallen awful deep below zero. And the wind is bitin' mean tonight." Flinty warned, "you'll never make seventy-five miles in this weather."

Jan was ready with an answer. "I'll take the summer trail. Cut off twenty-five miles that way."

The old sourdough shook his head dolefully." Better lay over in Polar Bottom. I know these valley windsweeps. Hail comes down an turns the whole Koyokuk into a skatin' rink."

Nevertheless Teniken buttoned his parka. "I do not care what you think." He turned to Flinty. "I come from the north too. Do not forget that."

The old sourdough grimaced, "I tellya there ain't no place like the Koyokuk. Once nature starts raisin' a rumpus you never seen anythin' like it."

Jan Teniken saw that the guests were impressed by his resolution to take the summer trail. It was too bad that Nita wasn't here. As he stepped outside he was blanketed in a blast of wind that pressed the breath from his lungs and made him cough coldly. He bent over his sled and packed it tight. He had a team of three. If he moved quickly over the summer trail he would be at Wanika's for breakfast.

He looked up at the sky. If a storm was coming it was many hours away. Jan took hold of the gee pole and moved on.

He heard a voice crying after him in the wind. At first he ignored it. Then he turned around. It was Nita. She hurried towards him. Her blue fox fur was pressed against her pretty face. "Jan Teniken do not go back to your cabin." she said. He felt his heart beat happily. She must have been spoken to by old Keeka. "My father . . . ." the wind made her turn away for a moment. Teniken waited anxiously for the next words. They were not what he wanted to hear.

"He said there will be a terrible storm tonight and you will die."

Jan was solemn, "I have been in many storms. In this country and in the old

country. I am not afraid of storms and superstitions."

Nita stamped her foot in the snow, "Flinty was right. You are a stubborn fool. You refuse to learn any more than you already know. You have the thickest head in the Koyokuk!"

Jan turned to her, "Go back to your government school. Go back to where they have taught you that woman knows more than man. That daughters are no longer given in marriage by their fathers."

He jerked the tandem and his team started towards the darkness. He steeled himself against her and did not once turn his head. He knew her small figure was disappearing behind him and his heart ached for her. A year ago she had been soft and woman-like. If he had asked for her hand then it would have been different. The school had spoiled her. Now she was a nurse. As though a woman had to go to school to learn how to take care of a man!

Jan shouted at his dogs. He wanted to get away from the place. The wind softened. It stole easily from the north now. And the spruce bowed gently on the snow ridges. Jan told himself if there was a storm it wouldn't be much and he would have reached Wanika's by then.

He had seen the stars, the wind and the whole feel of the thing in the old country. Storms that destroyed men did not start like this.

THE dogs moved easily up the summer trail. As the path turned Jan glanced back at Polar Bottom. It was just a spot of tiny yellow light a million beneath frosty stars. Two lamps blinked like owl eyes in the last cabin. And soon they vanished in the night.

The wind came whipping through the trees now. It created a weird singing sound. And with it came sheets of hail. Jan covered his face with his gloves. The dogs kept turning and blinking their eyes. He ordered them on. The hail storm lessened but didn't cease. Jan was getting used to it and so were the dogs.

The trail was covered more deeply with snow than he had expected. Jan saw that his progress would be slow. That perhaps it might be better for him to turn back and stay in Polar Bottom. Then he laughed at the thought of it. Ed Nolan, Flinty Morrow and the others would be glad to see him defeated by the north. But he would show them that Jan Teniken could more than hold his own against the Koyokuk.

He smiled when he thought of the gold he would take from Maddox Creek in the summer. In all their years in the region none of the sourdoughs had found the yellow dust. It showed that he was the best man in the Koyokuk. After the summer he would take a wife. If Nita did not realize his worth by then it would just be too bad for her.

Jan calculated that he was more than ten miles from Polar Bottom. The trail was getting deeper with snow. His dogs stopped and Jan had to urge them on. When they plunged ahead he had to help them by pushing the sled from behind. The sky had gone terribly black. The moon disappeared into nothing. Even the lights of the stars were going out.

As the wind whipped, the tree branches cried like ghosts. Jan urged the dogs until they panted with each step. The sheets of hail increased. He couldn't see more than a few inches ahead of him. Once he turned off the trail and gone several hundred yards before realizing his mistake. He cut back again through the deep ice frosted snow.

As he plunged blindly ahead he wondered if he had re-located the trail. It seemed that each step of his mukluks broke new ground. Soon the dogs were choking and barking wildly at the wall of snow and ice which blocked their path. Jan looked for the north star to guide him. It was completely blanketed in blackness.

He looked for shelter. A few spruce. A lone pine. There was none that he could see. Jan stepped before the dogs and began to break the path for them with a shovel. He cursed angrily as the shovel stuck several times in the frosty snow. He had to break some of the ice blanket with the handle of his shovel. But he was able to move on.

Each step, no matter how slow, was bringing him closer to the Koyokuk and

the roadhouse of Wanika. A choking rain of hail lay heavily up on him now. He buried his chin on his chest and bent double to protect himself. It pelted his back like stones and he winced. He had never seen a storm like this in the old country.

And suddenly its icy fury subsided as quickly at it had risen. Jan roared at his dogs and drove them ahead at mad speed. He must make the river before the storm rose again.

He no longer trusted anything in the Koyokuk. It was not like the old country. The weather changed with treacherous swiftness. A shrewd man of the trail was not its master, he was at its mercy. A few more feet and the dogs stopped dead in their tracks. No amount of commands could budge them. Jan came around from the back of the sled. He saw the reason for their stubbornness. They were at the edge of a decline of some half a hundred feet.

His eyes narrowed. He saw something that resembled a trail below. It was like a huge dead frozen snake winding its glittering way through the valley. It was the Koyokuk River. The sight of it made his heart swell with confidence. Once he crossed it the trail would be easy for it wound through a sheltered valley.

He untied the dogs from the tandem and let them go down by themselves. Slowly, carefully he picked his way down the embankment. He shoved the sled ahead of him and heard it slide into the snow bank beneath the decline. He was at the edge of the river now. He hitched the dogs up again and stepped out upon the Koyokuk.

Jan saw that the river seemed entirely covered with snow. He let the dogs and sled go before him. Between their paws and the sled's runners they should be able to detect water holes. Nevertheless Jan took a stick from the sled and poked it through the snow.

He halted and stared at the center of the river. It was completely clear in the middle. The wind had blown it into a shimmering mirror of ice. Jan figured he would have little trouble crossing now. Once he reached the other bank he'd make Wanika's in a few hours. He would have the laugh on the sourdoughs of Polar Bottom.

He followed the dogs to the middle of the river. The wind had polished the surface with granules of frost. The ice was treacherously smooth. It was impossible to step without sliding. Jan's mukluks began to skid beneath him like skates.

THE dogs howled and barked as they fell upon the surface only to rise and fall again. Their eyes pleaded with him to turn back. Jan looked back to the shore and it began to hail again. The rain of ice beat down unmercifully. Jan moved forward slowly. He couldn't turn back. It was more than pride. He was half way to Wanika's. And the trail would be easier now. The only sensible thing to do was to keep advancing over the middle of the river.

The dogs were making headway. They slid and they barked but they managed to pull the sleigh towards the opposite shore. As Jan moved forward he felt his toes push beneath the ice. He turned about in panic and his heel kicked up and he crashed on his side. His foot was wet. He had stepped into a water hole. He must build a fire immediately. It would freeze, his foot would be gone and then . . . .

As he thought of these things it was as in a dream. For he was unable to move. The hail beat down upon his prostrate body. The dogs gathered around him. He managed to rise to his elbows and then he slipped on the ice again. This time everything went black. There wasn't even a thought as in a dream.

When Jan opened his eyes he was no longer on the Koyokuk. He could feel a straw mattress beneath his shoulders and a pine needle pillow beneath his head. He knew he was in a cabin that smelled strongly from medicine. He looked at a table and he saw bandages and a flask of brandy.

Across the room he saw the dried brown face of Wanika staring at him. "How did I come to this cabin!" Jan asked. The Indian stirred, "Nurse and old man bring from river."

Jan's face twisted as he felt sudden pain in his foot. He leaned over to touch his toes but there weren't any toes. His eyes looked at Wanika in panic. The Indian leaned towards him. "Girl cut off. She say you die if no take off end of foot."

Jan sat up in a daze. His memory flashed back to the moment he had lost consciousness on the ice. How long had he stayed there? How had they managed to cross the slippery river when it was impossible for him? His head hummed with weakness and his face fell against the pillow. For days he felt chills, fever and delirium. Jan was vaguely aware of the presence of Wanika and Nita.

Then one day the sun streamed into Wanika's cabin and he felt well enough to stand on his heel. He was able to walk with the aid of a stick. Nita had gone to Polar Bottom. A few afternoons later he heard a tapping on the door while Wanika was out setting traps.

Jan limped across the room. It was Nita. Her pretty eyes glanced up at him. "You look well today." she said quietly. He held the door open, "I feel much better."

"We can take you to your own cabin now." Nita offered.

"I would not like to be alone." Jan Teniken replied.

"That should be no problem for the greatest man in the Koyokuk." she said. Jan Teniken turned his head away and said nothing. Then he looked at Nita. "I am just a man. I have much to learn." he said quietly. He was surprised at the tears in her eyes.

It was many months before Jan Teniken and his wife, Nita, saw Flinty Morrow again. The old sourdough sat before the pot bellied stove and chuckled. "Yup, Teniken. I can thank ye for the biggest yarn I'll ever have to spin. It was a lucky thing that Nita decided to bring lots of canned food along that night you was lyin' on the Koyokuk. Me," Flinty shrugged, "I didn't think you'd gotten as far as the river. Once we come to the Koyokuk the big problem was crossin' it."

The old sourdough bit off a mouthful of tobacco. He chewed silently for a moment and then continued. "After we got the food out of the cans we had a heck of a job knockin' 'em into shape to tie on the runners of our sleds and the bottoms of our mukluks."

Flinty Morrow smiled, "But as I said before they're ain't no other way to cross the Koyokuk when she's froze like glass in the tail end of a hail storm."

Jan Teniken nodded, "This is strange new country alright. I guess man must stay all of his life in Koyokuk to become part of it." "Jan," Flinty said, as he began to work into another yarn. But the younger man wasn't listening. For he had heard himself called "Jan" for the first time since he had come to the Koyokuk. And he knew now that he was part of the region for the old sourdough had told him so.

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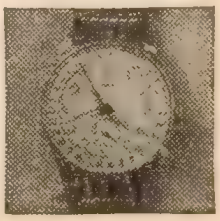

3 YEARS GUARANTEE

TRAIL OF TERROR

By C. HALL THOMPSON

A fortune in yellow gold rode the sled north to Circle City. The frozen sea of the tundras seemed ominously silent. And beneath the slate-gray sky the snow-wind kept whispering: *Beware the trail tonight.*

IT IS all long gone now, and too many snows, wind-combed from the Arctic Peaks have buried under the old mining trails. On the rimrock of driedup creekbeds, you can still find barren holes that once promised chechakos a fortune in yellow dust and gave them only fool's gold. The signs that said Wild Cat Mine and Golden Nellie have turned to shattered woodslabs soggy with damprot. And, in Winter, the blue fox lives in the excavations.

People have forgotten the dog-punchers with their Yukon sleds and huskies. Today, there are other methods of freighting mail and valuables. If the old wayhouses still stand, years of wind and storm have eaten away the chinking of Alaska long mess, and the dirt rooves have bellied in. No one uses the roughhewn polebunks anymore; the blackened stove is cold. But, there are a few, like Jesse Brewton and me, who remember other days.

And maybe, under the snow near a wayhouse thirty miles North of the Klondike, a pile of gray stone still marks a small grave. Perhaps, in the veins of the white wolves that lope over moorwashed tundras, fighting proudly and furiously to live, there runs the blood of The Proud

One. And, because of these things, we are not really forgotten. The land remembers us.

That was the year McQueston and Harper struck it rich on the Klondike, and North from Dyea Pass and South from Circle City, chechakos pounded trail to Dawson; and, overnight, an obscure camp mushroomed into a tent city. They came with too much equipment and too little food, and stuck in the teeth of a starvation threat to grub in the earth's belly for a shining metal. They didn't starve.

They built fires to soften the ground and dug pits straight down to bedrock; narrow deep pits, so cramped and muggy that even in freezing weather, a man come up fresh from the hole was sweating like a bull. But, they found dust. They saved it in rawhide pouches and slept with a gun near at hand. In the Fall, dog-punchers would freight their mail and a year's gold-take North to Circle City and the safety of the banks. Only, when October came, the miners were worried. There was talk of robberies on the freighting trails.

Jesse and I had heard the talk. We knew it was true. One of our Company men had been shot down when he tried to save his sled and freight. So, we were primed for the uneasiness of the Klondike camp we rode into at sundown. Men came and stood under tentflies and watched us pass. They studied our dogs and sled. They looked at Jesse and me and their unsmiling eyes had questions in them. They wondered if we were the men to trust with their year's haul. But, they wondered in silence until John McCurtan spoke for them.

I remember that night, coming into the Klondike Queen; I smell the rawness of barwhiskey and hear a banjo whining *In The Evening By The Moonlight,* and the way the music stopped when we pushed through the swinging doors. I remember the aisle that opened for us to the bar, and men muttering and staring, and the quiet, steady way that Jesse stared back.

Jesse Brewton had a way of walking, like a good horse, straight and broad at the shoulders and swivelling easy at the hips.

His face was long with sharp planes, sleepy-lidded eyes, and a grin that was slow and sure and arrogant like every move he made. When his eyes hit John McCurtan, the smile did not change.

"Howdy," McCurtan said.

I said howdy. Jesse nodded. The barkeep was thin with red hair parted like John L. Sullivan's.

He said: "Your pleasure, gents . . ."

We ordered. The stillness waited; smoke that smelled like burnt sorghum hung heavy on the air. John McCurtan drank and set down his glass. I knew what was coming. So did Jesse.

McCurtan was short and built round; folds of fat made his face big and soft-looking. His lips laughed a lot behind a heavy mustache. But, his eyes could turn cold and pin you down. When he talked, the men of the camp were behind him. His round face smiled my way.

"Reckon you got a rough trek ahead . . ."

I downed the shot and reached for the chaser.

"We'll make it," I said.

Jesse didn't say anything. He seemed not to be listening. But, his mouth was tight.

McCurtan got out makings and rolled one. His eyes probed.

"I don't know. Hear one of your boys was gunned freighting the take from the Birch Creek mines . . ."

The listening quiet crawled long the bar. Mukluks shifted in sawdust.

"Miners on the Creek lose much?" McCurtan asked.

I pointed at my glass. The barkeep refilled it. I shook my head.

"They didn't lose anything. Our Company makes a deal. You get vouchers for every ounce of gold we carry. We contract to haul it to Circle City. If something goes wrong, the Company makes good your loss . . ."

A mutter pushed up through stale smoke. McCurtan's eyes were careful.

"If the Company can." He smiled. "You been taking losses straight down the line. How long can you keep paying off? . . . Way the boys around here figure, them vouchers ain't worth much. They'd rather be sure of the men that freight their gold . . ."

JESSE'S glass made a hard flat sound on the bartop. His voice was too soft.

"Nobody's begging to haul their stuff. Let them keep it here."

The grin went rigid on McCurtan's lips, then got real again.

"Don't get me wrong," he told Jesse. "We want the dust carried to Circle. Down here, it comes hard and goes easy. Too easy. If a man wants to come out on top, his take has to be where high prices and loose living won't eat it away. It has to be banked . . . Then, there's the letters. We got home-folks that ain't heard a whisper of us in 'most a year. They're bound to worry . . . The boys like to be sure the mail gets through."

Jesse's slow words cut like a knife.

"They don't trust us, let them carry it themselves."

This time McCurtan quit smiling. An angry murmur went through the men.

I cut in quickly, "No call to fret, Mister. We'll get through."

McCurtan kept looking at Jesse.

"It mightn't be simple," he said. "You might have to fight. Risk your hide to save somebody else's gold . . . Some men wouldn't cotton to that idea."

The miners waited. Jesse's answer didn't come. He just stood there, leaning against the bar, and smiled.

I didn't like the smile. There were secrets behind it.

I said: "If we have to fight, we will."

Very slowly, McCurtan's gaze swung back to me. For a long time, he squinted through cigaret smoke. Then, the fat man's grin returned. The laugh came in gradual, mountainous rumbles.

"You know," he said. "I think you will."

The saloon breathed again. Men started to talk and laugh and McCurtan told the barkeep to set up a round. The old sourdough with the banjo dug into *Buffalo Gal*. The drinks came and McCurtan laughed and bumped glasses with me, But, when I looked at Jesse that smile was still there. I didn't know why, but the whiskey tasted lousy.

The send-off party brawled into the wee hours. At sunup, there was cotton on my tongue and a fuzz of rotgut in my brain. Morning wind, brushing along the empty slushy street, cleared it slowly. Cinching the packstraps tight around the sled's frame, Jesse was silent. I got to work on the traces. Dutch, the lead dog, nuzzled my hand as I hitched the lines to his belly-band. I patted him absently, watching the cool blankness of Jesse's face.

Finally, I said: "You ought to be more careful."

He hauled a strap taut and cinched it. He didn't look at me. "Why?" he said.

"You're new to this game. Baiting McCurtan could lose us a good contract."

Jesse didn't answer. A slant-eyed Spitz came up and sniffed the lines, envying Dutch's lead position. Dutch bared white fangs and his huge chest muscles tensed. "Easy, boy," I told him. The Spitz cowered back to its rightful place in the traces. I stood up looking at Jesse.

"These men got a lot tied up in this haul. A year's work and letters to home . . . They got a right to worry."

"So, they worry . . ." His eyes met mine. Lazily, that grin curled his lips. "Like I said. If they don't trust us, let them find somebody else to do their dirty work."

There was no answer to that one. Jesse knew it. Ours was the only freight sled to be had. I kept quiet.

Jesse hove weight against the geepole and hawed. The sled cracked out and Dutch yelped orders to the team. We began to move along the snow-quilted stillness of the tent street. Jesse had stopped smiling, but the secret was still back of his eyes. They made me think of the eyes of a gambler dealing you cards at blackjack and knowing you can't win. I wondered what that look meant. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Maybe there was no call for uneasiness. Maybe it was just the memory of that smile nagging me. But, before us, the frozen sea of the tundras seemed too dead and silent. No game stirred in the spruce groves and the huskies had gone quiet in the traces. Dutch fretted at the lead as though something strange about the trail disturbed him. Even the smell of snow on the wind annoyed me. I didn't like the thought of fresh drifts bogging the runners and cutting our speed in half.

It seemed not to bother Jesse. He pressed on easily through the crusted snow without looking to left or right. I told myself to can it; McCurtan's talk of risks had got too far under my skin . . . But, at high noon, we halted by an evergreen wood for grub, and I knew Jesse was wrong. And I was right.

The tracks of a sled cut across our trail at right angles and disappeared into the wood. Jesse and I looked at each other. I didn't say anything. I followed the twin scars into the grove; halfway in, they swerved North and ran parallel to the route we meant to take. I went back and told Jesse.

He kept forking beans out of a tin. His face didn't show any emotion.

"You can't tell," he said. "They could be old sled tracks."

I shook my head. "They're too fresh Highjackers would be smart enough to head off the trail up further and set an ambush for us."

Jesse wiped his fork clean and threw the empty tin into a drift.

"You can't tell," he said.

I didn't answer. I went to the sled and buckled on a cartridge belt; there was a Colt in the holster.

"We're not taking chances," I told him. "You carry the Winchester."

Jesse stood up slowly. The rifle was in a holster under the sled tarp. He made no move toward it. Quietly, he said:

"I got no need for a gun."

I looked at him long and hard. Then, the idea hit me Those secrets weren't so secret any more and there was a nasty taste in my mouth. I kept the words toneless.

"Don't be too sure. If there was an ambush, you'd never reach that sled holster in time."

THE dogs moved restlessly and the snow-wind played sullen whispering games in the grove. Calmly, with his back to me, Jesse tested the traces.

"Maybe I wouldn't want to," he said.

I moved closer. He stood up straight and the start of that smile played with his lips.

"What's that mean?"

"Just what I said."

"I'm stupid," I told him. "Make it clear."

Jesse fished an oilskin pouch from an inside pocket and filled his clay pipe with easy care.

"We work for a freighting outfit. They pay us to haul mail, dust, grub." The smile shadowed. "They don't pay us to be trigger-men."

I felt sick. I had liked this Jesse Brewton. He worked hard and kept his nose clean and he was good company on a spree in Skagway or beside a stove in a lonely wayhouse. We had hit it off. Only maybe I have never known him. Now, I thought I did. And it wasn't a pleasure.

"Like I promised McCurtan," I said. "If we have to, we fight."

He studied me a second, then started to turn away.

"I got no hankering to die scrapping over another man's billy-do."

I caught his mackinaw sleeve and under it the arm was tense. I didn't let go.

"It ain't that simple, Jesse. You heard McCurtan. Men got hopes wrapped up in this shipment. Hopes of a new life, something better for a wife or a kid . . . They got folks waiting for their letters."

"You're breaking my heart," Jesse said.

"All right, talk bright. I only know one thing. A man's hired for a job, he's got two choices. Do it . . . or welsh."

The smile pulled down at one corner and his neck looked suddenly swollen. He wanted to knock my teeth down my throat. He didn't. The grin came back as he freed his arm. It was a slow movement, even and gentle. And stubborn as a Missouri mule.

"You're excited," he said softly. "A man don't want to get excited. Excitement gets you in trouble. A man wants to think. Cold and clear and without emotion. It keeps him breathing."

My throat felt tight. I couldn't break through the frozen wall of that smile. Finally, I said: "Listen to me. This is a new land, North of Fifty-three. You got to help a new country, Jesse. It's clean and fine to start with. Maybe you got to fight to keep it that way. If you don't, the land don't want you."

He laughed. "I'll make out. I'll live."

"Live?" I said thickly. "You're not living. You can't live and throw out all the decent things in life. You got to know the good of doing a job right. There's a feeling of pride inside a man, and later . . ."

"Sure. I know. Later, he gets his reward. In kingdom-come. No thanks. A bullet hole in the gut wouldn't make me one bit proud."

He wasn't smiling any more. His face had gone stiff and dark.

"Now, you listen, friend. You know what all feeling and no brain can do to you? I knew a guy once in Tombstone. Just a cleancut kid that thought a lot of his sister. Her name was Hetty. A plain name. But, Hetty wasn't plain. Hell, no. All the boys knew Hetty. One of them knew her too well. When her brother found out, he strapped on a gun. No thought—just emotion. He killed Hetty's boy friend. They hung him for it . . . And Hetty?" the laugh was sour. "She works in a saloon. Upstairs. Come one, come all. Hetty loves them all. A born tramp. And a nice kid died to 'save her reputation'."

It was quiet for a long time. Jesse took a deep breath.

"I saw other things," he said. "I saw my Aunt throw her life away on the card-crazy bum she married. She never thought it out; never got back of his flashy vest and handsome mustache. She called it love. She died of it—alone. He ran off with a she-bum from a tent-show."

He shook his head and looked down at the restless chafing of the malemutes. In the lead, Dutch sat watching us with his one good eye. Jesse stared at the dog.

"It could've been different for them." His voice was flat. "My Aunt could've seen the waste of loyalty to a man like that. The kid could've seen the truth about Hetty. All they had to do was cool down and think. They didn't. A bunch of big noble words got mixed up in their heads and, in the end, there was no sense, no logic. Nothing but blind emotion." His cold eyes stayed on the lead-dog. "They were like animals. Like Dutch . . . the proud one . . . And they finished the way he'll finish. Beating their thoughtless brains out against a stone wall."

The words died slowly and the bitter echo of them played out across windswept barrens and I looked at Dutch.

He was a Porcupine River Husky, a hundred and sixty pounds of working flesh. A deep scar showed through the white hair of his massive chest; part of his left ear had been bitten away and there was a blind slit where the left eye should have been. They were battle scars. Along the freighting trails, men told stories about Dutch. Other dogs could be broken and trained to any position in the traces. Not Dutch. He was whelped a leader and a leader he'd die.

He was one of the best. Unhitched, at the end of a long day's trek, he would wolf his ration and lope off across the tundras or through the wood and in the night, when the wolves called, Dutch sang with them. But, come dawn, he was always there, waiting for the harness. He was jealous of his job and fought all comers to keep it. He wasn't young; he had lost an eye to the fang of a breed-dog that tried to overthrow him. But, the breed bled to death through a slashed jugular and Dutch stayed in the lead, proud and challenging and willing to pay the price.

"I don't know," I said softly. "Dutch does what he has to do. He feels the rightness and pride of doing what's expected of him. And, maybe, that's enough. Maybe it was enough for your Aunt . . . and the kid in Tombstone."

HIS laugh stopped me. It was toneless and dead. For a while his gaze held mine and then, abruptly, he turned and went to the sled. He freed the lines and jiggled the geepole and Dutch lunged forward, snapping the other dogs into action. We moved.

The Winchester was still under the tarp on the sled.

Ahead, the white stillness grew hilly and pocked with deep bottomlands, and the tundras rose sharply under us, breaking against the slate-gray sky. It didn't make me feel better. We topped the hillocks blind; anything could be waiting on the other side.

The snow was the last straw. It came heavy and swift, driven before a ragged wind. If sled-tracks had crossed our trail

further on and had drawn up, hidden and ready to ambush us, we would never know. Fresh drifts blotted out every scar on the white rolling land. I swore. A soft chuckling sound came to me under the soughing wind and I looked at Jesse. All I could see was that smile in the shadow of his parka. He knew what I was thinking. And he was laughing at me.

It began to look like he had reason. The rises got steeper and more vague in the big soft fall of snow, but the far side was always empty and still, sliding down into another flat. Once, in the grove to our right, there was a sudden movement. A caribou stared curiously at my gun and then spun, flitting off downwind through the bush. I didn't look at Jesse, now; I knew he was still grinning. All the same, I felt easier when we sighted the wayhouse.

Long and low, the log building nestled in a crotch of land away from the wind. I thought of the russet glow of a pot-bellied stove and the smell of strong tea and afterward sitting on the deacon seat, stockinged feet pushed toward the heat, and I relaxed a little. The first leg of the trek was behind us. Maybe the talk of highjackers had been exaggerated. Men liked a tall one with blood spilled in the right places to tell around the chuck-fire.

The corral was behind the house on the lip of a fir grove. Walled in by tall poles stuck upright in the ground, it made a good shelter for the sled. Once outside, the dogs couldn't get to it to snitch food. In silence, we unhitched the lines and fed the huskies. I saw Dutch push out through the gate and bound low and easy across the white gully until he topped a hill and then he was gone. The other dogs followed. I turned to Jesse. He had our grubpack on his shoulder. We headed for the cabin.

Here in the wayhouse hollow the quiet was cushioned and, unnagged by wind, the snow drifted gently to earth. The whisper of our boots seemed very loud. A cold sensation went along the small of my back and I thought: Inside. Inside, it would be better, with food and the warmth of the fire. I lifted the doorlatch and pushed in.

"Stand still and lift them."

The voice came out of pitch darkness somewhere ahead. It was quiet and cold and hard to locate. Behind me there was a dull thump. Jesse had set down the pack. His shadow was clear in the doorway. I saw him raise his hands slowly. I followed suit.

Inside me, sudden tension sang and the muscles of my calves were tight. I leaned forward, waiting.

The blackness breathed and then a match grated and flared and I saw him, standing along by the table. He was long and wasted-looking with blond hair that hung down over one eye. His cheeks were sunken and an unlit cigarette dangled from pale lips that smiled. He reached the match toward the oil-lamp's chimney; the wick blazed up. I moved.

You get these things in splintered snatches. I remember going in low and the nasty button-eye of his gun coming up too late because I was under it and the rawness of his mackinaw raked my cheek and shoulder. I got a left below his ribs and they were bony like the ribs of an ill-fed bitch, and up close his narrow face was pockmarked, with sweat like puddles in the deep pits. We slammed back into the stove and the pipe collapsed and I tried with another left that opened his mouth wide and he screamed, "Sloat!" Then, thick fingers closed on my arms, wrenching back, and the man behind me said, "Got him, Cotton!"

It went dead quiet again. Slowly, the one called Cotton straightened and pushed the blond hair out of his eyes. He came at me smiling, only it was a sinister smile. Through the ache of my twisted arms, I thought: Jesse, but I didn't get a chance to yell. Cotton pulled back his leg and let go. The boot dug into my groin and I sagged, pain-blinded, and Cotton laughed and said, "Hold him up!" and did it again. I went to the floor. The ceiling spun over me and the square brightness of the doorway, and Jesse took one step toward me. Someone said, "Stay put." The third man was in shadow behind Jesse. He had a gun. Jesse didn't argue.

The thin lopsided oval that was Cotton's face straightened out and came into focus. His hands closed on my shirtfront and dragged me up. He had the gun from my

holster. He was still smiling when he slammed the barrel against my jaw. I tasted blood. Jesse did not move. He just watched. Softly, Cotton said:

"You'll be good, now, hero. You'll play it smart, like your friend does." The thin smile swung on Jesse. "That way, you stay pretty . . . and alive."

"He's smart." I coughed. "He's real smart."

Jesse didn't look at me. His face was like stone. Cotton came closer.

"All right, hero . . . Where's the freight?"

I coughed. The blood was salty and warm on my lips.

"Ask the smart boy," I said.

Cotton stepped back and said, "Sloat . . ."

Sloat was broad and had fists like sledgehammers. The right doubled me at the middle. Cotton rolled a cigarette neat and cool. It hung from his dry lips. Sloat started another right.

"That's enough," Cotton told him.

Sloat didn't want to quit. But, he did.

Close and dead gray, Cotton's eyes squinted, laughing behind smoke.

"Sloat likes to play, hero. Sometimes he gets rough. He killed a man once. With his bare fists."

The glowing cigarette tip was near my face. I could feel its heat.

Cotton said, "Where's the dust?"

"Let him alone."

Jesse's voice was calm. So was his face. It was like watching a disinterested stranger. I looked away.

"The freight's still on the sled," Jesse said.

Slowly, Cotton turned and walked to where Jesse stood. He drew in smoke.

"I like a smart man," he said. "No heroics; no crazy tricks. Just good common sense. And nobody gets mussed up."

He exhaled the gray cloud full in Jesse's face. Jesse took it. And smiled back. It made me sick.

Cotton laughed and signalled Sloat. They went out through the pale square of the doorway and the third man motioned with his gun at Jesse and me. I went first; as I passed him, Jesse started to speak. I gave him a look that said go to hell. He kept quiet.

Outside the snow fell, cottony and slow and soundless. The corral was dim. Sloat's thick shadow hunched over our sled, working. He straightened.

"Bright boy wasn't lying. It's all here."

Cotton nodded, watching Jesse. "Where's the dogs?"

"We turned them loose," Jesse said.

Cigarette smoke turned white on the dark air. Cotton said, "Hanna . . ."

The third man looked at him. Cotton took his gun and held it level on us.

"We'll use our own team."

HANNA nodded and went out and turned east into the grove shadows. They must have hidden their sled in the brush. We waited. Cotton kept grinning at Jesse. Finally, we heard malemutes yipping and Hanna led the string into the corral. He and Sloat worked fast, hitching them to our sled. Then, under the chafing of Cotton's team, it came.

The growl was low and furious and came from beyond the corral wall. Jesse glanced at me quickly. I said, "Dutch!" and as I said it, the vicious rumble lifted to a long bitter wail. Cotton spun toward the gate and Sloat said, "Jesus!" Dutch didn't notice them. The lean powerful body glided over packed snow. Pale fangs were naked and the enraged roar ripped from his throat again as he lunged for Cotton's lead-dog.

"Get him!" Cotton yelled. "The devil'll kill Skookum!"

It was almost too late. Skookum had turned in the traces, braced for the snarling impact of Dutch, but he was short-legged and fat and the weight threw him off balance. He snapped wildly at air and Dutch swarmed over him, teeth tearing for the stretched throat. Sloat moved quickly. There was a load of firelog against the wayhouse wall; the bar he lifted was long and thick and brutally knotted. He pushed past me and stood over the tangled mass of animal flesh. The blow was murderous and deliberate as a piledriver.

Dutch caught it along the head, rolling back with a low roar. Snow flurried from his flailing paws, and then, yards away, he

twisted abruptly to his feet again. Powerful legs were set wide and tense; the head was low and his one good eye watched Sloat, unblinking. You could feel confused instincts coursing through the massive body. Man had taught him to lead, yet a minute ago, when he fought to do his job, he had been struck. He glared at the waiting shadow of Sloat, at the lifted bludgeon, and his breath came faster; the fangs bared again. He didn't understand. And he didn't like it.

Cotton was beside Sloat; he took the club. That grin was back.

"Another hero," he said. "The place is lousy with brainless heroes."

The words were lost in Dutch's cry. The husky didn't have a prayer. Cotton was planted and waiting. Again, coldly, the sick crack of the club laid along Dutch's skull. He spun away at a crazy angle, back and up, and hit the ground on his spine and this time he got up slower. The huge head shook away confusion. But a woodknot had torn the skin across the crown and dark red blood ran down into his good eye. He blinked, facing Cotton instinctively.

"Easy, boy . . . never mind . . ." I took a step toward him.

Hanna let go with the gunbarrel. Behind my ear something blew up. I went to my knees.

I don't know how long it went on. I couldn't see clearly. But I heard the dull impact of Cotton's club again and again, and the cry of pain turning to a wet furious growl as Dutch went in for more. Once, I tried to stand, but frozen earth came up hard in my face. I choked. "Jesse . . ." He didn't answer or move. He watched Cotton tense for the next blow. In the end, broken, almost completely blind, Dutch lay a few feet from me, panting thickly. He couldn't get up.

Cotton looked tall standing over me. His breath came slow and even through that smile.

Sloat said: "What do we do with them?"

Cotton shook his head. "No need for guns. Not now. Even they do get back to the camp without grub in this storm, they won't talk . . . One of them's smart. Smart boys keep quiet . . . The other . . " He looked at me steadily "He'll cool down; he'll remember: what happens to a dog can happen to a big-mouthed hero . . . Braining is messy. It's not a nice way to die."

THAT was all. Sloat and Hanna had the sled hitched. For a second, Cotton looked at us, then he laughed without a sound and walked away. Sloat worked the geepole and yelled, "Mush!" and the team broke out, tracebells wrangling, brassy and too cheerful. At the sound, painfully, Dutch rolled over on his belly. The blind face turned, anxious, locating the noise. He whimpered. The sled pulled through the gate and swung North into the trail. Jesse stood staring after it. His face was expressionless.

Dutch growled, struggling up. I tried to hold him. I talked gently. He didn't hear. The halter tore free of my grip and Dutch made for the gate at a frantic, limping run. I called out. He didn't stop. We could not see him, now; we could not see the sled that had rounded a bend beyond the cabin. We could only wait. The shot was a flat, final sound. Dutch cried once. The stillness settled back in. The snow drifted. Finally, distant and lonely, the tracebells tinkled again. And then, they were gone.

"The rats," I said softly. "The dirty rats."

Jesse looked at me. I wanted to think the stiff control of his face was forced. Maybe there would be an undertow of pity in his voice; maybe it was anger that knotted his jaw muscles. But the words came slow and bitter and cold.

"The proud one." He shrugged. "Maybe he had to die for nothing. He was an animal; he couldn't think . . . Men are different."

"Some men," I said. "Some men are different."

He let the sarcasm go. His tone stayed level.

"There's wood for a fire. In the cabin we can wait the night out."

I didn't answer. The snow sifted. Out on the tundras a wolf bayed.

"The storm'll spend itself," Jesse said. "We'll hit the backtrail by sunup." He came toward me slowly. "It's a long haul. You need rest."

I swayed, getting up. I didn't lean on him.

"I can make out," I said.

It was like I had hit him. For a moment, his mouth went rigid, then, gradually, that insolent smile curled one corner. I didn't say any more.

The wayhouse was damp and chilled. Even the fire did not warm it. I sprawled on the straw of a polebunk. My jaw ached. I tried to doze but it was no good. Each time I shut my eyes, I saw Dutch. Jesse sat by the stove. His face looked pale in the fireglow. He spit at the stove and moisture hissed on the hot metal. Once, our glances met. His eyes were sleepy and blank, but back of them . . . Maybe it was the want of sleep heavy on my senses. Maybe there were no more secrets behind that stare.

I woke suddenly. The window, made of empty picklejars chinked with mud, was near my head, and without moving I saw the mouse colored wedge of light that was dawn bleeding into the sky. The snow had stopped. A heavy breathless stillness weighted on the cabin. I sat up too quickly. The room pinwheeled and settled. It was empty. The stove fire was dead. I sat there, feeling the certainty tight in my chest and I knew he wasn't outside; I knew he wouldn't answer if I called. I knew he was gone.

You work with a man nearly a year, you think you know him. How could he be that rotten? Not even guts enough to go back and face the music.

The thought stopped me dead and lay cold and sobering against my brain. McCurtan and those miners were the kind who finished the job they were hired to do, or didn't live to talk about it. What did you say to men like that? I lost a year's work for you because I didn't want to get hurt. So sorry. You'll strike it rich again someday. I laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. I could almost sympathize with Jesse's runout.

A sharp chorus of yelps broke the far off stillness. It came nearer. I pushed open the cabin door. It was our dogs, back after a night's roving, barking and scraping at the corral gate. All there, except . . . I pushed the remembered echo of a shot and deathcry out of mind and concentrated. Cotton had taken our sled hitched to his dogs. Then, his sled must still be hidden in the grove. And I had nearly a full team. Suddenly, I was sweating. Maybe I didn't have to face them. Maybe I could still make a decent end of it . . . like Dutch.

The sled wasn't hard to find. As I cinched the lines, numbness drained out of my body. Cotton and his men would have moved slowly in the storm. Fresh huskies could close the gap. It wasn't logical. The odds were dead against me. But I was sick of logic. I wanted to stop being sensible and feel human again. I geed the sled clear of drifts, bawling at the team. The air felt harsh and clean against my face.

Without Dutch it wasn't the same. The dogs were fretful and slower in breaking trail. More than once, they nearly wiped out the faint traces of Cotton's route only half-covered by fresh snow. I coaxed them on over steep tundras that made the going worse. Uphill, I had to run ahead, riding the geepole to hold speed. It was dangerous. A man could be run down or spiked through the lung if the pole broke. I didn't worry. The feeling of rightness was warm in my chest. That was all I needed. I was an hour on trail when the sled broke into a low clearing between two hillocks. And I heard the shot.

I flattened facedown in a drift. The shell-whine died and ahead, in the cold glare of sunup, the scene was suddenly sharp-edged and very clear.

A camp had been struck in the lee of one rise. There wasn't much left of it. The lean-to staggered crazily and dead firewood was scattered. Still hitched to our sled, Cotton's team yelped frantically. On his back, his head spilled sidewise in the black firepit, Hanna lay very still. His hand still gripped the Winchester. A skinning knife had been plunged hilt-deep in his throat. I recognized the knife. It was Jesse's.

Then, I wasn't looking at Hanna. I was up and running in a low crouch. Cotton and Sloat had Jesse between them; they were working him over, hard. I heard Sloat grunting with the power he threw into each blow. Jesse went low, like he was

crumpling, and then suddenly brought one up from the toes. Cotton's head jarred back and up and he spun away at a crazy angle. Jesse turned on Sloat. He didn't see Cotton go for the Colt. I did.

"Wait for baby!" The cry brought Cotton around on his heels. Stringy blond hair spilled over one eye. He tried to keep bead on Jesse. I hit him shoulder first in the gut as he fired. I could not see Jesse and Sloat. But I heard the wet strangled scream. Cotton tore free. I let him go, twisting toward Jesse. Clawed fingers still clutching at him, Sloat caved in slowly; the bullet had caught him in the chest; blood came through his lips, paling against the frozen whiteness of earth. Then, staring beyond me, Jesse yelled: "Cotton!"

The blond man had already reached the sled. He slipped the brake and snapped, "Mush!" and the team lunged ahead, toward the sharp Northern rise. I took a few steps, awkward and slow in fresh loose snow. Jesse shook his head.

"Those dogs are fresh. You'll never catch up."

"The sled," I said thickly. "The freight."

Cotton's figure pushed along with the runners, leaning out at a weird angle. The sled ground uphill.

"He's riding the geepole to gain speed."

Jesse brushed past me and bent over Hanna's body. He swung the Winchester to his armpit and aimed in one smooth motion. The sound of the shot was edged and flat. Cotton did not fall. But, in the traces, the lead husky yelped and bucked wildly into the air and came down face first. The lines fouled and dogs jumbled in a snarling knot and, behind, the sled lurched to one side. We didn't hear the snap of the geepole. We saw Cotton's arms spreadeagle and his feet leave the ground and, high on the icy air, the echo of his scream died slowly. Jesse lowered the gun. We stood quite still. Once or twice, the long arms bent in spasm. Finally, Cotton lay motionless. He was dead when we reached him. The ragged end of the pole had driven up into his ribs and come out red and wet through his back just over the heart.

I glanced at Jesse, half expecting that slow smile. It wasn't there. He spoke quietly.

"I figured they'd have to camp a short ways uptrail. They couldn't mush all night through that storm. I was slow on foot. But, I got here by sunup."

I opened my mouth; there were words in my head. Fighting against three to one odds wasn't the choice of a thinking man. But, somehow, the words went unsaid. There was an unblinking gentleness in the eye that met mine and I thought: Maybe it was—the choice of a thinking man who had come to know that if feeling without thought was animal, thought without feeling was less. It was something dead and inhuman; it was a giving up of the decency and pride and hope that were the reasons for living.

Jesse had turned away and begun the work of shifting the freight to the undamaged sled I had come by. Without speaking, I set to helping him. Once Jesse looked at me.

"Funny, ain't it?" he said. "An animal teaching a man to be human."

I smiled the answer.

"Reckon we'll hit Circle on schedule, after all," I said.

But we were a little late. There was something we had to do. Near the first Northern bend beyond the wayhouse there was a grave to be dug. We sank the pit with fire, and gently lowered Dutch's body. The bullet had torn away part of his head; we covered the wound with tarpaulin so that no earth would strike it. Jesse gathered shale and rocks and we built a mound that marauding wolfpacks could not move.

When we had finished, Jesse stood staring down at the grave. A friendly wind already brushed protective snow into the rock crevices. And Jesse smiled, a soft quiet smile, without insolence or coldness, and I knew he wasn't seeing the frozen broken memory of life we had just buried. He was seeing Dutch, strong and full-chested in the traces, finding new trails, leading the way as he always had, and always would. His voice came low:

"The proud one . . ."

There was nothing bitter or sad in the way he said it.

THE SLICKERS

By G. W. TWEEDDALE

Honesty went flying down the sluice box when the Klondike's two leading proponents of the old bunco game matched wits.

SOAPY SAUNDERS spread a mammoth, well-cared-for hand on the table and smirked at the man seated opposite him. "Pussy," he said, I am fully aware that Jim Berry is a mining engineer, and a good one." Soapy leaned a little closer to his companion. "But the Saunders Development Company is not in need of a mining engineer. They are too nosey, especially these Alaska boys. They not only have to see a property before reporting on it, but actually they have to see the makings of a mine before they will make a favorable report.

"Now the Saunders Development Company moved into this territory to make a quick clean-up. But get this, Pussy, development does not necessarily imply digging gold out of the ground." Soapy Saunders emphasized each word with a sharp tap of a large forefinger. "That's the hard way. I have an aversion, a most decided aversion to hard work."

He removed a silk handkerchief from his pocket and flicked a tiny speck from his snowy cuff, then glanced cautiously around the barroom before continuing. "You know, old man, Barnum surely knew the human family when he made that much quoted statement. 'A sucker is born every minute.' We have, you know, a large list of these easy-caught fish. No, Pussy, our immediate need is for an advertiser. And he must be better on the ballyhoo than I, which means really good."

Pussyfoot Hanson tipped back his chair and lit a cigarette. "I got the idea, Soapy. You want blub, and Sam Pepper is your boy. He done advertising in a circus before the Klondike bug got him. Right now he's running a blackjack game down

"You haven't the guts to use a gun, Soapy Saunders. So why the bluff?

at Tony's. But he's been telling me he ain't satisfied. No chance at Tony's for percentage. Too many gumshoes."

Soapy Saunders pursed his lips and toyed idly with his liquor for some moments before making any comment. Then a sardonic smile spread over his hawklike features. "This Pepper boy sounds good. But, Pussy, you know in my position one has to be careful. I feel that taking a common gambler on as an employee would be indiscreet."

Pussyfoot guffawed. "I'm right in your sights, Soapy. This man ain't a small time gambler, only to get a meal ticket. He's an educated boy and has a swell front. Looks like a country guy."

Soapy signalled the bartender. Then, after downing another whiskey, rose to his full six foot two and spread his legs wide. "I am," he announced to Pussyfoot, "A man of decision. Have this Sam Pepper at my office in an hour." He waved a hand majestically, adjusted his tie, and sauntered into the street.

It was one of those midsummer days for which the Tanana Valley is famous. Just pleasantly warm, with a gentle, sweet-scented breeze rustling in the tree tops.

Fairbanks was a new camp and suffering from growing pains. Clary Creek was swinging into production in a big way. As Soapy made his way towards the rough board shack he called his office, he watched with extreme satisfaction the pack outfits streaming into town. Other outfits were heading out for the hills. New strikes were an almost daily occurence, which meant a big camp. And a big camp meant more easy money for Soapy.

THE appointed time for his meeting with Sam Pepper found Soapy seated behind a large roll-topped desk. His coat was off, sleeves rolled to the elbows, while his hands fumbled with some papers.

He did not look up as Pussyfoot lumbered in, accompanied by a neatly dressed little man with a great mop of fiery red hair. Pussyfoot, following the cue of his boss, sank silently onto a bench and motioned the little man to a chair.

For sometime Soapy continued to sit, seemingly engrossed in the papers. Then, apparently feeling that his prospective employee was properly impressed, he swung around to face his visitor and stated pompously. "I'm sure you fully appreciate the fact that rapid development, such as we are experiencing in this district at present, has simply swamped us with business."

Pussyfoot, feeling that he was again keeping pace with the boss, rose to his feet. "Mr. Pepper," he said, "this is Mr. Percy S. Saunders, President and General Manager of the Saunders Development Company."

Soapy expanded his chest and blew a cloud of smoke from the huge black cigar clamped between his teeth. "Mr. Hanson has, I take it, informed you of the reason for this meeting." Soapy carefully knocked the ashes from the end of his cigar. "I am in need of an advertising man. Salary no limit if I secure the right man. I do not have to tell you that to hold the job you will have to be top notch. Saunders Development will have none but the best."

Had Soapy been less engrossed in his attempt to impress his visitor he would have noted the amused half-smile lurking in Sam Pepper's eyes as he listened. "I have had a wide advertising experience," he assured Soapy. "And know something of mining and development." The little man turned so as to face Soapy and looked him squarely in the eyes. "I, also, know something about promotion, both the legitimate and the unscrupulous kind."

Soapy Saunders gasped and jumped to his full towering height. Sam Pepper paid no attention to this unexpected action on the part of Soapy. He continued speaking, only now he was openly smiling.

"You can relax, Mr. Saunders. I have your measure. This, however, does not mean that I won't accept this position. Quite the contrary, provided we see eye to eye on the salary arrangement. Five hundred per month and expenses is my figure; and, having developed some rather expensive habits in my travels, my expenses will be high. Say another five hundred."

Soapy gulped twice and opened his mouth wide. "Mr. Pepper," he sputtered, as soon as he found his voice. "One thou-

sand per month is a lot of money to pay out of the treasury for one advertising man. Why, that's more money than I draw myself. That is," he hastily amended, after one look at Pussyfoot. "Except in an emergency."

"I can see your position." Sam Pepper spoke absent-mindedly, his gaze focused on the lettering "Percy S. Saunders" on the little iron safe to the left of Soapy's desk. Then, bringing his gaze and his attention back to his prospective boss, he said briskly. "It is my understanding that you are hiring advertising ability, now lacking in your organization, and which is most essential to its success. I am selling that ability at my own price. Take it or leave it. If you are doubtful, try me out for sixty days. In the event I do not deliver the goods I'll settle for half."

Soapy wiped the perspiration from his forehead, with the ever ready silk handkerchief, and settled back in his chair. "Mr Pepper," he said, endeavoring to sound the aggressive business executive. "I don't know why, but I'm hiring you. And if you can really throw the blub I'll double your salary."

Sam rose. "Done, Mr. Saunders, and I'll report at eight sharp tomorrow." He pointed to the somewhat battered but late model typewriter. "Work?" he asked. Soapy nodded in the affirmative. And Sam Pepper, with an airy wave of his hand, headed for the door.

Soapy waited until the door banged shut, then turned an accusing eye on his man of all work. "Pussy," he stormed, "you have been talking. That boy has been let in on the ground floor. And mind you, Pussy, before he had even been hired."

"Don't get your dander floating 'round," the fat man replied. "Nobody has been talking. I told you Sam Pepper was smart. And, Soapy, just because he is smart enough to get your measure don't mean he ain't a good man for you to tie to."

Soapy slumped down in his chair. Was he slipping? His mind drifted back to review his many ventures in search of easy money. He had always succeeded in getting his full share . . . Soapy smiled . . . . Yes, and often the other fellow's too. But now he had detected a note of doubt in no other person than his trusty henchman. This, he felt, was a direct challenge; and, by George, he'd prove to Pussy, as well as to this Sam Pepper, he was still the ace man. "Seems this kid is, as you say, Pussy, really smart. In any event, he's hired now and I shall give him his chance. Dogface Johnson came in yesterday from the Seventy Mile River. Says he has a big placer, partly opened up, on the south fork. I don't believe he has the values he claims, although

MACKENZIE DOES IT!

The first crossing of the American continent north of the Spanish Settlements was accomplished, not by Lewis and Clark, but by a British fur trader, Alexander Mackenzie. Mackenzie, with a small party, left Ft. Chipewyan on June 3rd, 1789, taking several Indians and an interpreter. He was, no doubt, in search of a Northwest Passage. It is quite likely that he believed Great Slave Lake drained into the Pacific Ocean.

On June 29th, after considerable delay due to ice, the party entered the river which was later to bear the name of Mackenzie. On July 10th they reached the delta of the river, and proceeded down the middle channel to the Arctic Ocean. They returned to Great Slave Lake, somewhat disappointed, and arrived at their starting point on Sept. 12th.

In May 1793, Mackenzie, with a small party, ascended the Peace River, where white men had never been before. He had no guide. When, therefore, a month later he met some Indians who had been to the shores of the Paific, he engaged one of them to guide the party westward. They reached the head-waters of the Peace, made a portage, and on June 17th reached a navigable branch of the Fraser River. This river, he was told, flowed into the Pacific Ocean.

However, he learned from other Indians that it would be a long and dangerous journey by the Fraser, and that the way overland was neither long nor difficult. He followed the overland route, along the Blackwater and Bella Coola Rivers, and on July 20th the party reached the shores of the Pacific. The next day, at Cape Menzies, the following inscription was made in grease and vermilion on a rock:

ALEXANDER MACKENZIE, FROM CANADA, BY LAND, THE 22ND OF JULY, 1793.

Mackenzie soon retraced his steps, and reached his headquarters on the Peace August 24th. On his return to London, he was knighted in recognition of his contribution to Arctic exploration.

he's probably not lying about it being a schist country and laying well for placer. And if that is the case we can, if necessary, throw in a few ounces of bait. The reason I am picking this property is because it is situated in an isolated district where, few, if any, of our investors would venture.

"However, in order to keep a clean slate with the Territorial authorities, one of my representatives must look it over. Pussy, that man is going to be Sam Pepper. He can get his outfit together and pull out with Dogface day after tomorrow." Soapy pounded on his desk, scattering the legal-looking papers he used for a business front. "And, Pussy, the report he makes must be sufficiently convincing to sell our deal to the gullible public, or Mr. Sam Pepper will join the ranks of the unemployed."

Pussyfoot Hanson spread his pudgy hands and rescued some of the papers by placing a fat finger on every one he could reach. "You ain't got a worry in the world," he predicted. "This Pepper guy is a builder-upper, and the boobs will get the gold bug proper on his line. Also, Soapy, it ain't going to surprise me if he don't even sell some of the wise guys along with the weak sisters. All you got to do, Soapbox, is to pass along his bait."

IT WAS just one month later that a mud-splattered little man, in trail clothing pushed open the office door of the Saunders Development Company and strode to the typewriter.

Soapy, hunched low over his desk in a pleasant catnap, opened his eyes and straightened up. He cleared his throat with a loud "Haw." But his visitor did not appear to be aware of his presence. Removing the cover on the machine he seated himself, arranged some notes, and adjusted paper and carbon. Then the quiet of the room was broken by the rapid click of the typewriter as his fingers flew over the keys.

Soapy was not used to being ignored. He rose and took a few steps and stood looking down on the typist. "I have been waiting for you," he declared brusquely. "How was the trip? But, above all, is the property suitable for our purpose? I mean good or bad for sucker stuff?" The questions came fast.

Sam Pepper did not look up, nor did his fingers hesitate in their task. "My report will be ready in one hour," he said shortly. "Now beat it."

Something in that voice caused Soapy to literally shrink in his shell. He gave his usual gasp of bewilderment, then tiptoed out of the building.

The tycoon of the Saunders Development Company was seated at his special table in the Bonanza barroom, an hour later, when the door flew open and Sam Pepper beckoned. Soapy reached the street in time to see Sam's back disappear through the office door. And when Soapy reached his office, less than a minute later, he caught his breath sharply, then sank down onto the typewriter stool. Sam Pepper was seated at his, Percy S. Saunders', desk with his muddy shoe pacs nestled amongst the legal-looking papers.

Sam smiled broadly as he looked at the dejected figure of his boss. "You look rather down, Soapy. Need something to give you some of that enthusiasm so essential to the success of our business. My report will lift you up," he promised confidently. "Read it while I go clean up." He lowered his feet, taking no notice of the several legal-looking documents adhering to his dirty shoe pacs. Instead, he handed Soapy a dozen of his own typewritten sheets. "It is now three PM. I'll be back at six."

Soapy did not answer. He made for the comfort of his desk chair and sank down with a sigh. He carefully laid Sam Pepper's report on his desk, then gazed off into space. His dignity had been trodden upon by this half-pint, and he must think of a plan to tame his advertising man. Suddenly he smote his knee. He had it. He would fire this Sam Pepper, irrespective of how good a report he had turned in. Sam would have to crawl to get back. Then, after the little man was properly humbled, he would hire him back at half his original salary. Of course, the agreed five hundred dollars would continue to show on the books, only P. S. Saunders would take the difference for—say, pocket money. The matter of disciplinary mea-

sures for Sam Pepper decided on, Soapy settled more comfortably in his chair and commenced his study of the report Sam had left.

He read the report once, and a slight flush came to his cheeks. Then he reread it, from Introduction to Conclusions. Now his hands were visibly trembling. Suddenly he crammed the papers into an inner pocket and hurried into the street. He took one quick look at the Hunker Saloon entrance. Then, apparently satisfied that he was unobserved, he headed for a tent camp a block distant.

Soapy paused before reaching the tent door. He must appear calm when he talked to the owner of the Seventy Mile property. Waiting until the thumping of his heart quieted somewhat, he pushed the tent flap back and entered.

Dogface Johnson was stretched full length on a pole bunk, puffing smoke rings towards the ceiling. As Soapy entered, he rolled over, dumped the ashes from his pipe onto the dirt floor and sat up. "'Spose Pepper has reported to you," he stated flatly. At Soapy's nod of assent, he blurted out. "You know what? I is of the opinion that this little runt is a right guy, also plenty smart. He wouldn't do no talking. But I seen some of them there rich rim pans he took, and, I'm a-telling you, them there claims is in the money."

Soapy, trying to control the twitching of his facial muscles, answered in what he hoped was a calm voice. "Johnson, you have, according to Pepper's report, a fair prospect. Now, as you know, I'm a gambler. Name a cash price, and name it low. It's quite possible we can deal."

"I's a fast dealer when it comes to cash. Twenty thousand spot for my forty-eight claims," Dogface stipulated. "Then go ahead and make your million. Me, I can't count to no million. You know, same as I do, that them claims is a steal at twenty grand. So talk fast if you figger to deal. I got other customers."

Soapy was convinced that Dogface was right about twenty grand being a low figure. But he was, for the first time in his life, purchasing a property with his own money. His face turned purple as he tried to make up his mind. He would offer fifteen thousand dollars. No. Dogface had mentioned other customers, and he might not be bluffing. Soapy's hands shook at the very thought of losing the property. Dogface might even raise the price; might know, or at least suspect the contents of Sam Pepper's report. At the last thought Soapy sprang into action.

"I accept that offer," he said hoarsely. "Put on your boots and come with me to Lawyer Foster's office and we'll close the deal."

IT WAS just five minutes to six when Soapy Saunders unlocked the door to his office and hurried over to his desk chair. A feeling of relief came to him at having beat Sam Pepper to the office and, particularly, to the chair; even if, in the meantime, Sam had cleaned the mud from his shoe pacs.

Promptly at six the door swung wide and Sam strode in. He pulled the straight-backed chair up to the desk and seated himself, at the same time staring unblinkingly into the shifty eyes of his employer. "Mr. Saunders, you have read my report." Sam Pepper made the statement. Then, stressing every word, he asked tersely. "How about it? Satisfactory or not?"

The President of the Saunders Development Company squirmed. He had felt that once his deal with Dogface was completed and the papers placed in the Recorder's Office he could, as undisputed owner of the Seventy Mile property, tell Sam Pepper off. But now, even after all this had been accomplished, the smug smile of satisfaction with which he had greeted Sam Pepper faded before the steady gaze of the little man.

What if this Sam Pepper were a fighting

GERM-FREE

The long winters and short summers of northern Alaska, together with light precipitation (both snow and rain), retard the growth of bacteria to such an extent that materials and articles which would decay rapidly in warmer climates last almost indefinitely along the Arctic coast. Thus we account for the fine state of preservation of the large collections of Eskimo artifacts made by Stefansson, Brower, Jenness, and others.

man. Soapy did not like fighting. Ever since that morning, years ago, when one of his victims had throttled him until his face was blotched with purple and his tongue lolled, he had avoided physical encounters. His cheeks paled even now at the thought. No, he must not take chances, he must appease. Desperately he tried to think. Then like a flash it came to him, and for the first time his eyes met the level gaze of Sam Pepper.

"Mr. Pepper," he said patronizingly. "Your report was most satisfactory, and I will make a check for your salary to date. I say to date, because, my boy, I am stepping out of the Saunders Development Company. Yes, Sir, and who do you suppose I am naming as my successor? Why, none other than yourself, dear boy." Soapy actually beamed. Once again he failed to see the impish look in the little man's eyes as he tilted his chair far back and hoisted his heels to rest atop the legal papers, just opposite Soapy's inflated chest.

"Mr. Saunders," began Sam Pepper. "I accept your offer with certain reservations and with certain definite understandings. First. I know that the entire cash assets of the so-called Saunders Development Company are vested in you individually, and when you pull out the assets go with you. Second: I am fully cognizant of the fact that the sucker list you so characteristically term your clientele, is made up of the usual gullible widows, etc., and would be of no interest to me.

"Now we come to the firm name. You will pardon me, Mr. Saunders, but while there is much in a good name, there is nothing intriguing in the name 'Saunders Development Comany!' This leaves total assets of one board shack, 18' X 20', and one lot 75' X 100'. Present boom-time value of same is some two thousand dollars.

"Soapy, now that the cards are on the table face up, what's your deal? Keeping in mind the fact that the signboard on the door will be altered to read, 'Sam Pepper, Mine Development and Operation'."

Inch by inch Soapy's chest had deflated as Sam talked. Now he was slouched low in his chair. He was beginning to feel real fear for this little firebrand. He had not told Sam his reason for stepping out of the Saunders Development Company, yet he was convinced the little redhead knew the answer, and would probably use this knowledge to trade on.

Soapy was nervous. He must close a deal before he lost his self-possession. Already he was having trouble controlling the trembling of his hands. He forced a sickly smile and straightened in his chair. "In view of your most valuable services, Sam, I am disposed to be generous." Soapy spoke faintly. Then, as the idea took hold, he said in a firm voice. "And, by George, I will be. I'm making you a deed to the office and lot, and we'll call it square." Soapy was really beaming now.

The eyes of Sam Pepper bored into those of the big promoter for almost a minute, then his heels left the desk and he came to his feet. "You have named a deal," he declared. Walking to the typewriter, he commenced typing. In a few minutes he rose and handed a paper to Soapy. "Foster will be at the roadhouse," he stated tersely. "I'll go along."

HALF an hour later Soapy Saunders was seated in his room at the MacDonald Roadhouse, pouring over, for the seventh time, Sam Pepper's report. Again he came to the last paragraph, marked Conclusions. "This property, if the entire area were sluiced, would produce many millions of dollars in gold."

The paper crackled as Soapy's hands commenced to shake. He recognized the need for haste. Without delay he must commence the sluicing. Two months, at the most three, and the freeze-up would start. He hurried down to the bar, where he saw Zeek Millins, the packer, seated in the rear of the room having a friendly game of poker. Catching Zeek's eye, he beckoned excitedly.

The two men went upstairs to Soapy's room, and Soapy began outlining his needs. After Zeek had finished figuring each item, he was almost as excited as Soapy. This was the largest order he had procured so far in the Fairbanks district, and would net him a handsome profit.

"If you wish me to take care of everything, Soapy, it will be something like this." Zeek waited for Soapy's nod of assent. "Twenty-five pack horses—at—we will say twelve dollars per head per day; one thousand board feet sluice lumber; tools; camp equipment; grub——" Zeek figured rapidly for some moments. "Will be twelve thousand, eight hundred and sixty dollars."

Soapy, much to Zeek's astonishment, only nodded vaguely when the total was announced. While Zeek had been figuring, the late head of the Saunders Development Company had again withdrawn the report and pursued, word by word, the concluding paragraph.

It was just three days later that a long string of pack horses headed out onto the Satcha River trail in the general direction of the Seventy Mile Divide. Zeek Mullins was in the lead and Soapy Saunders was next in line.

Soapy was strangely sober. Now that the first feverish excitement, induced by reading Sam Pepper's report, had somewhat subsided he was calculating the costs. Up to now his investment in the Seventy Mile property amounted to nearly thirty-six thousand dollars, and the ten man crew had demanded twelve dollars per day each, with board. Of course, the board was represented in the grub he had already purchased. But with a payroll of one hundred and twenty dollars per day his remaining capitol would be completely exhausted in less than ninety days. At the thought a near panic seized him. He spurrred his horse closer to Zeek's.

"You do not suppose," he questioned anxiously, "that I have been too hasty in making such a large investment in this property before having examined it personally?"

Zeek Mullins cocked one leg over the pommel of his saddle, then bit off a large chew of tobacco. "Can't say, Soapy. Knowing, as I do, next to nothing about mining," he replied. "But that report you showed me sure makes it look like you're in the big money. As you know, Soapy, I've been in mining country for the past fifteen years. And the reading

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of your report gave me the first real gold bug I've ever experienced. In this Alaska country, fortunes are made over night. All you have to do is to be in the right place at the right time. And I would say you have done just that."

Soapy breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, Zeek was right. It had always been like this. He had taken full advantage of every opportunity. Again he withdrew the report and carefully scanned its pages. No need to worry. He would have many pack loads of gold before the freeze-up.

IT WAS a cold blustery day, some three months later that Sam Pepper, seated at the desk in his lately enlarged office, heard the tramp of boots on the newly-laid board sidewalk. A moment later he came to his feet, staring at the dishevelled figure that burst into the room.

For several seconds he stood thus, silent and motionless. Then his voice, staccato sharp, vibrated through the room like the crack of a whip. "Drop that gun, Soapy!" he commanded. Then, as the gun in the hand of Soapy Saunders wavered, he continued in a cold, deadly voice. "You haven't the guts to use a gun, Saunders. So why bluff?"

Blind fury leaped into the bloodshot eyes of Soapy. He raised the gun and fired. Then Sam Pepper was upon him, and the gun was wrenched from his hand. At the same time Sam's fist connected with his jaw, sending him sprawling full length. His hand contacted the typewriter stool, and he came up, swinging it wildly. But Sam Pepper ducked under and Soapy's feet left the floor. As he crashed against the wall, Soapy's last conscious remembrance was that a demon was standing over him, raining down sledge hammer blows.

The big man woke to the hum of voices and splash of water on his face. He was deathly sick, and his body felt as though a steam roller had passed over it. Sam Pepper was bending over him, while a stranger in city clothes stood by.

The stranger reached into his pocket and produced a flask, which he now held to Soapy's lips. The fallen man drained the bottle thirstily, then felt a little better. The stranger extended a hand to Soapy and raised him; first to a sitting position, then to his feet.

Through his one good eye Soapy saw Sam Pepper slide around the desk and seat himself, at the same time pointing to a chair directly opposite. With bowed head Soapy staggered to the designated chair and sank limply into it.

Sam Pepper lighted his pipe, hoisted his heels to the desk, and surveyed his handiwork with evident satisfaction. "Soapy, how does it feel to be on the receiving end for once?" he questioned, half jokingly, half sternly. "Does it give you a slight twinge of sympathy for some of your victims?" Soapy sullenly shifted in his chair. "You do not have to answer, Soapy. I know it does not. The only thing you really fooled me on was having guts enough to fire that gun. Lucky for you the shot went wild. Otherwise your checkered career would have wound up with a murder rap.

"Now I suppose the fit of rage that gave you that courage was brought on by a conviction that I tricked you. You are correct, my man. I did just that." Sam Pepper brought his feet to the floor with a bang. "And why? Think back, Soapy, and compare my report to one you yourself made some twenty years ago on a certain Nevada property. You will find that both reports gave the same identical impression to the reader. Only yours, Soapy, lacked the necessary advertising ability that I put into mine. Both reports were designed, and so worded, to inflame the imagination of a gulpin.

"Take my report. I did not estimate the value per cubic yard. I simply stated that if the entire area were sluiced it would produce many millions of dollars in gold. I did not say it would be profitable to mine it. As a guess, I would say there are some nine hundred million yards of gravel within the boundaries of this property, probably averaging six cents per yard."

Soapy had heard enough. He started to his feet, but Sam held up a hand and, perforce, Soapy dropped back to the chair. "I am not through, Soapbox. I intend to tell you a story." Soapy stirred uncom-

RATIONS

Along the north coast of Alaska dogs are fed one meal a day—at the end of their sledge journey. The standard ration in winter is 1½ pounds of dried tomcod and a half pound of seal blubber, cut in small pieces.

fortably, but Sam Pepper's voice went relentlessly on.

"At the time you made the report on the Nevada property, you were peddling stock in the city of Seattle. Armed with this same report you hooked a widow for five thousand dollars . . . all she had . . . You swore to her that she would make at least one hundred thousand dollars on her investment. You surely must remember. This woman lived in a little brown house in the north end of town. She took her case to a lawyer when she found that you had lied to her, but was informed that your printed advertising was so cleverly worded that you were, by a hair, inside the law.

"Soapy, it was this sale of stock, this five thousand dollars you secured from the widow, Mary McGrath, that tripped you. For you see, Soapy, Mary McGrath was my mother." At Soapy's incredulous gasp, Sam further enlightened the now thoroughly cowed and frightened man. "I only adopted my college nickname of Sam Pepper to trap you. My real name is Sam McGrath. And, incidiently, I am not a crook, and was far from broke when I came here from Nome."

Sam waved a hand towards the stranger, who had been silently watching the scene unfold. "My partner, Judge Purdy here, tells me the United States Postal authorities are looking for one Percy S. Saunders. I'd advise you to report to them. Like the Northwest Mounted, they always get their man."

Soapy struggled slowly to his feet and looked dazedly around. Sam's voice followed him as he made for the door. "Soapy, this experience should teach you that there is no bunco game, yet invented, that is proof against backfire."

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ISLE OF DOOM

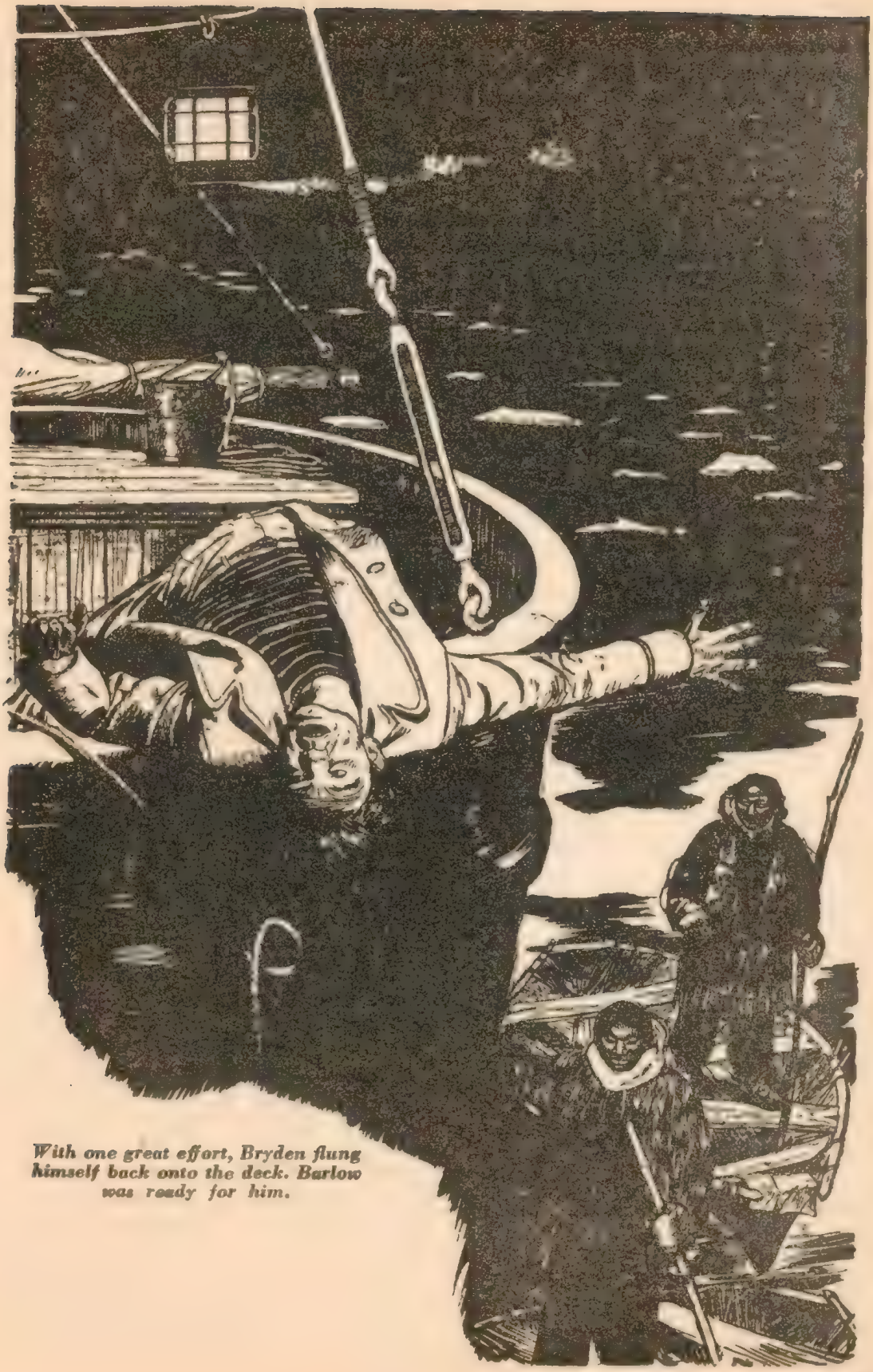
By ALEXANDER WALLACE

Few men knew the Arctic seas better than Black Barlow, cold-blooded skipper of the schooner, *Cachalot*. And fewer men knew of his murderous scheme as he set sail for Coronation Gulf—and the *Isle of Doom*.

HUGH BRYDEN had signed on the *Cachalot* as mate at Sitka and he regretted it. Not that snatching furs from under the nose of the Hudson's Bay Company chafed his conscience—there was just enough danger in that to spice the game. It was the cold-blooded callousness of Black Barlow, owner and master of the trim, little schooner, that bothered him.

Few men knew the Artic seas better than Captain Barlow and wherever there was an Eskimo settlement the *Cachalot* traded. The fly-specks that dotted the chart, the nameless isles between Bathurst Inlet and Point Barrow, were her stamping ground. At the end of the long winter, when the pack-ice left the shore, and channels of blue water opened in the age-old accumulation, the Eskimos were always on the verge of starvation and the first trader to reach them could have his choice of pelts for a few pounds of bacon, tea and tobacco. It was a lucrative trade, especially for Black Barlow who had an Oriental conception of "squeeze."

That very morning the *Cachalot*, pushing her iron-shod nose through the new,



With one great effort, Bryden flung himself back onto the deck. Barlow was ready for him.

GOTTA STAY HAPPY

In order to survive in a most inhospitable environment, the Eskimos have been compelled to develop a highly specialized culture. They have shown remarkable ingenuity in making use of their scant resources and fashioning their hunting weapons. They use snow-blocks to make a house, clear fresh-water ice for a window, the intestinal membrane of a seal or walrus to make a raincoat, sinew from the back of a caribou for thread, whalebone or strips of walrus hide for sled lashings and rope, soapstone for lamps and cooking pots, and seal blubber for cooking meat and lighting their igloos.

They have evolved a throwing-stick to add impetus to a spear; this has the effect of lengthening the hunter's arm by a foot or so. They have invented goggles of wood, ivory, or bone, with mere slits to keep out the glare of sunlight on snow. They have made use of the principle of the block and tackle in handling the unwieldy carcass of a walrus, threading the line through holes cut in the ice and in the animal's hide. They have evolved the skin-covered kayak and the harpoon.

The harpoon differs from every other missile in that its penetrating head remains imbedded in the flesh of the animal. This makes it possible for the Eskimo hunter to prevent a seal, for example, from escaping in the water; he holds his victim at the end of a line.

The Eskimos also have to their credit a water-proof seal-skin boot and a method of glazing sled-runners that lessens friction on granular snow. They outwit all forms of animal life in the Arctic, from the whale to the Arctic fox. They even trick the lice which infest their bodies by drawing a small strip of polar-bear skin on a string underneath their attigi—and pulling it out, filled with vermin!

brashy ice of Coronation Gulf, had dropped anchor at the mouth of the Coppermine River.

The black skin-and-driftwood huts of an Eskimo village huddled in the lee of a frozen sandhill. They had come skimming out to the *Cachalot* in their seal-skin umiaks.

Men and women, their faces hollowed by hunger and privation but with newborn hope in their eyes.

They had no pelts. The hunting had been bad, and they had come begging. Barlow had driven them off, actually firing a few shots at one party that made a desperate attempt to board the ship. Bryden had watched the incident, anger clouding his blue eyes.

"You might give them grub enough to tide them over, Captain," he had suggested hopefully when he came aft. "The H.B. factors do it all the time, and they don't lose money."

Barlow had looked at him in silence for a full minute, his scowl as black as his square cut beard. He was a middle-aged man, powerfully built with plenty of spring in his muscles. When he spoke it was in a soft cultured voice, but the amenities of shipboard did not come to him easily He was unapproachable, remote—a man, Bryden judged, with memories that burned.

"What they do is their business, Mister," he had answered. "My rule is; no fur, no grub. How do I know that they haven't got furs cached somewhere? They're crafty, you can't trust 'em. I'll give them a few hours. If they come off with pelts, we'll trade. If they don't, we'll make sail. Go below and get your sleep, Mister."

The *Cachalot* carried only two mates and they split the day between them, six hours on deck and six below. It was a hard grind but Bryden couldn't sleep. It was impossible to sleep with the pitiful begging of the Eskimos drumming in his ears. According to Barlow, they were animals and as improvident; gorging themselves when there was meat and dying by the hundreds when the game failed them.

But the cry of hunger was the same in any tongue.

BRYDEN sat up in his bunk so suddenly that he bumped his head on the boards of the one above. He dressed quickly, muttering to himself. He was young, just twenty-eight; but he had served ten years as a ship's officer. He supposed that he knew his duty. Barlow could call it mutiny.

He could call it what he damned well pleased! There were some things a man couldn't do, or stand by and see done.

Although it wanted but an hour to midnight the sun was a pale disc above the southern horizon when he came on deck. Vapours rose incessantly from the sea,

shrouding the outline of the bleak coast with a luminous veil. Colin Ascot, the second mate, was pacing the poop deck somewhat unsteadily. He was old enough to be Bryden's father, a case-hardened shell-back over-fond of his rum. Bryden doubted that he was to be trusted.

Ascot pulled up with a startled oath as Bryden stepped in his path.

"What in the hell's this? he demanded.

"Couldn't sleep," Bryden told him.

The other man gave him a searching look and grinned:

"Well, I could. Maybe you'd like to finish my watch Mister?"

"Sure, you can go below," Bryden agreed quickly.

"That's what I thought," said Ascot with a dry chuckle. "But I wouldn't do it if I were in your place."

"Do what?" asked Bryden, trying to look surprised.

Ascot pulled his big, blue-veined nose. Said he: "Spent most of your time on the Princess ships between Vancouver and Skagway, haven't you? And don't know much about Black Barlow, eh?"

"Just what I've seen of him," said Bryden with a wry mouth.

"Well, you haven't seen anything yet, Mister!" He looked Bryden's tall figure up and down, noting the breadth of shoulder and lithe poise. "You're quite a man, son," he observed with an odd catch in his voice. "Once I had a boy like you. He was with me when I lost the *Princess*. Well, never mind. I'm giving you a little fatherly advice. Don't foul of Black Barlow. He plays dirty."

"Thanks," said Bryden . "Don't wake him when you go below."

Ascot shrugged and sidled off. At the companionway steps he paused and jerked his thumb in the direction of the shore. "If you want those fellows to come off, show 'em a red light."

Only an officer kept the deck when the *Cachalot* was at anchor at night. Bryden waited for a few minutes, then sent a red lantern aloft. He had not long to wait. Three umiaks shot out of the mist and were soon bobbing alongside. Faces looked up at him expectantly. They seemed to know that there was something underhand afoot, for they waited in silence until Bryden beckoned them aboard. Half-a-dozen of them came over the rail without a sound. They still wore their winter seal-skins with the hoods of their parkas thrown back showing coarse, lank hair and flat faces almost black with an accumulation of grease, smoke and other dirt.

Bryden rubbed his stomach and pointed to his mouth. They answered with a fine display of white teeth and a soft chorus of "Kee-kees!" He led them to a small hatch and opened it. He allowed each man to take as much of the rancid bacon as he could carry, then he closed the hatch and snapped the padlock.

The last of the Eskimos was going over the rail when Bryden saw Barlow come to stand at the head of the companionway. He wore his jacket over gaudy, striped pajamas the open neck of which showed the thick, black hair on his chest. The light flashed on the barrel of the revolver he held in his hand.

"What the devil's going on here, Mister?" he demanded, striding to the rail with his slippers flapping across the deck. Then he saw the umiaks with their loads of bacon and roared out an oath.

"Come back!" he bellowed. "Come back, I say, or I'll blow——"

Bryden darted forward as he raised the revolver. He caught Barlow's arm and slammed it down across the rail. Barlow yelped with pain as his hand struck the teak wood and the revolver dropped into the sea.

"BLAST you!" He whirled about to face Bryden, his big fists doubled and he launched a blow that lifted Bryden off his feet and sent him crashing into the deckhouse. Barlow followed him up, grunting as he drove his fists into Bryden's body. Bryden covered up. He made no attempt to strike back for the discipline of the sea was in his blood. He managed to push Barlow off, then backed away with a placating gesture, hoping that the other's rage would burn out before he was forced into a brawl with his Captain.

"Easy, easy!" he gasped as he sidestepped with light-footed grace as Barlow

tried to rush him. "Good Lord, you can log me for the price of the bacon, Captain!"

Barlow's answer was a string of vile epithets and a savage backhand blow that brought the salt taste of blood into Bryden's mouth. Then Barlow hit him again and he dropped to his knees. He pitched himself sideways as Barlow lifted his knee to drive it into his face. As he scrambled to his feet, avoiding a vicious kick, he caught a glimpse of Barlow's distorted face.

Ascot's warning flashed across his mind, there was maniacal hate, murder, in Barlow's blazing eyes. He forgot about discipline and stopped Barlow's next rush with a hard right to the jaw. Bryden was the lighter man and he took a good deal of punishment before youth and stamina turned the battle in his favor.

Now, Barlow's eyes were glazed and he was gasping for breath. Bryden set him up with a left jab and then stretched him out on the deck with a blow that split his knuckles and all but paralyzed his right arm. He turned quickly as he heard Ascot's dry chuckle behind him.

"You've done him up good," said the second mate, bending over Barlow's still form. "It's the first beating Black Barlow has taken in many a year. And he won't take it quietly, you can bet your pay on that!"

"Did you tell him?" Bryden demanded, angrily.

Ascot shook his head with a bitter laugh. He showed Bryden the marlin-spike that he held in his hand. He said:

"I'm not that far down in hell yet, Mister! But I followed him up. You see, if you were in his place you'd be over the rail by this time!"

Bryden looked at the old man with a new light in his eyes. "D'you mean you'd have slugged him with that?" he asked.

"Aye. I knew what you were up to, and I know Barlow. Better get him below, son, before the gang for'ard gets wind of it.'

They picked Barlow up by the head and heels, lugged him down the companionway steps and across the saloon to his cabin. He came to as they rolled him into his bunk. Bryden went to his locker and poured out a peg of brandy. Barlow pushed the glass aside with a scowl. Without uttering a word he got to his feet and went to the wash basin.

"A pretty mess, blast you!" he observed, studying his bruised face in the mirror. Bryden and Ascot exchanged quick glances. Barlow bathed and towelled his face.

"So, you're both against me, eh?" he said, suddenly turning to face them.

"No, sir!" said Bryden emphatically. "I'll pay for the blasted bacon, and that's all there need be to it!"

"That's what you think, Mister!" Barlow smiled thinly, "You're good, but don't let a lucky punch go to your head. You acted without my orders, against them, in fact. I could clap you in irons, you know that."

"Yes, sir."

"Aye, and if Mauchy had brains enough to take your place that's what I'd do. But I'd beat the tar out of you first, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Bryden agreed without change of expression.

"Very well, Mister," said Barlow with surprising calm, "we'll let it rest at that for the moment. I'll log you a month's pay for the bacon. Furthermore, Aklavic is as far as I care to carry you as mate of this ship. You'll pay off there with a bad discharge. And the sooner we get there the better I'll like it. Make sail, Mister!"

"Aye, sir!"

As they made their way forward to rouse all hands Bryden said: "He can't make that bad discharge stick without showing himself up. But he sure put a fancy price on his rotten bacon!"

Ascot shook his head dubiously: "If you get away with that you'll be lucky, son! He took it too quietly for my liking. Watch your step between here and Aklavic!"

II

AN HOUR later the *Cachalot* was under way. A cold, dank fog had settled on the sea; there was not enough

wind to fill her sails, and her auxiliary engine coughed and chugged while her horn sounded eerily at regular intervals. Barlow stood by the lee rail of the poop, feeling his way along the treacherous coast, judging his distance off shore by the echo of the horn.

'Pull her out, Mister!" he growled at Bryden.

"Aye, sir!" Bryden went to stand by the helmsman, jotting down the change of course on a pad in the light of the binnacle. Suddenly he saw a light, intensely blue, flare dead ahead. It was gone in a instant and he rubbed his eyes wondering if he'd actually seen it.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

"Aye, sir, looked like a life boat flare."

"That's what it was, then," said Bryden and went to report to Barlow.

"You're seeing things," snapped Barlow, but he came to stand by Bryden, peering ahead into the swirling fog.

"Well, where is it?" he demanded. "A flare should burn for at least five minutes."

"If it is a boat we'll run it down in a matter of minutes," said Bryden.

"Stop her then, blast you!"

The engine room telegraph jingled. The *Cachalot's* head swung slowly as she lost steering way.

"There it is—a boat, sir!" the helmsman sang out.

Sure enough a whale boat, with its sail drooping from its mast, had materialized out of the fog. It drifted across the *Cachalot's* bow and was soon dissolved in the fog. But not before Bryden had caught a glimpse of its two occupants. He was sliding down the poop ladder, shouting for the bo'sun to clear away a boat, as Barlow gave the order.

Mauchy, the bo'sun, an ape of a man with red hair that drooped from the crown of his bullet head like a thatch, drove the watch to haul on the boat falls with stinging profanity and a sly kick or two when Bryden's back was turned.

The boat went down smartly. A few strokes of the oars took them clear of the ship's side. After a short pull the shadowy outline of the whale boat loomed out of the fog. The name *Tania* was

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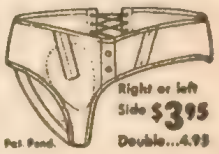

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painted in black letters on its bow. It had two occupants, one stretched out on the bottom boards, an old man with a white beard, the other had collapsed over the gunwale. A small white hand, still clutching the wooden handle of a flare, trailed in the water.

Bryden understood why the flare had gone out so quickly, but his eyes widened with astonishment as he stared at the small hand. As the two boats bumped together he jumped into the other. He bent over the still form of a girl with a face as pale as death but whose dark, wan beauty clutched at his heart and brought a lump into his throat. But she was not dead, her pulse was fairly strong.

"The old man's pretty far gone," Mauchy reported. "Sink me, if it ain't ol' Cap Korvich an' his gal!"

"Light a flare," Bryden ordered. "Keep 'em burning until the Cachalot answers." He took a flask of brandy from his pocket. Pillowing the girl's head in the crook of his arm he forced a little of the liquid between her bloodless lips, then handed the flask to Mauchy. She responded almost immediately, but in the blue light of the sputtering flare she looked like something that belonged to another world, too fragile and lovely to live. Her eyes fluttered open. Bryden looked into their violet depths and smiled:

"You'll be all right now, Miss," he assured her.

"What ship?" she asked, faintly.

"The Cachalot, Captain Barlow," he answered.

The girl's body stiffened. "Oh!" she gasped. "No-no!" Then a convulsive shudder shook her body and she began to sob hysterically. Bryden, not knowing what to do, held her in his arms like a child while the boat's crew looked on helplessly, their hard faces twisted awry with commiseration.

The girl had lapsed into unconsciousness by the time they bumped alongside the Cachalot. Barlow roared orders from the poop: "Take them aft, Mister. Bo'sun, get a tow line on that boat. Lively now, there's an inshore drift."

Directing the steward to care for the old man, Bryden carried the girl aft to one of the spare cabins off the saloon. She was still unconscious when he laid her in the bottom bunk, and he was glad of it. Certain things had to be done and quickly, if she was to live.

Without hesitation he removed her clothing and rolled her into a blanket. Then he went to the galley and came back with hot pads which he placed against her feet. He waited until he saw the warm blood creep back into her cheeks then went to see what had been done for her companion.

THE OLD MAN'S faint pulse, his hands knotted with convulsions warned him that death was near. He sent the steward for more hot water and worked until the sweat poured from him, trying to restore circulation. The dying man's eyes opened as he packed hot pads against his feet. His hands went slack on the coverlet and his black eyes looked up into Bryden's grave, young face.

"Thank you—much," he whispered with a strong foreign accent. "Too long—my heart not strong. Come near—a word before I go."

Bryden bent over him and his face took on a puzzled expression as he caught the jerky words that fell from the blue lips. He started as the cabin door opened and Barlow's shadow fell across the bunk.

"What was he saying?" asked Barlow.

Bryden straightened up. "He's dead," said he, drawing the blanket up over the still form. Barlow stood in the doorway looking down at the dead man with an odd expression in his eyes. He said. "So, that's the last of Ivan Korvich, eh? It's a damned queer thing that he should die on my ship."

"You knew him, Captain?" Bryden asked, trying to keep his tone casual.

"Aye, I knew him!" Barlow answered with a peculiar emphasis. "A queer cuss if ever there was. He owned a fur-trading post before the United States took over Alaska. They say he cleaned up a fortune. He never took it outside, I know that! Damn it, if I'd known it was him sooner I might have kept him alive until he talked. Are you sure he didn't say anything?"

Bryden shook his head: "He said his heart was weak. Then he started to talk in a foreign lingo, Russian, I suppose."

Barlow pondered his words, staring fixedly at the still form beneath the blankets; "I wonder if the girl——" He broke off, then: "All right, Mister, have Mauchy sew him up. A piece from an old sail will be good enough for him."

Bryden nodded. He was glad to leave, Barlow's callous tone sickened him. When he came back with Mauchy, he was not surprised to find that the corpse had been thoroughly searched.

Just an hour later with the melancholy cry of the gulls for a requiem, Ivan Korvick's body slid from a hatch cover into the sea. Barlow closed his tattered Bible with a snap and stalked aft. Bryden handed the watch over to Ascot and hurried below. He couldn't make sense of Korvich's last words, but he knew they were meant for the girl's ears alone.

He wanted to talk to her, to get the connection between Barlow and Korvich straight. But as he crossed the saloon Barlow called him aside.

"I'm writing up the log, Mister," he told Bryden. "Have you got anything to add?" Bryden shook his head in answer and Barlow gave him a sharp look.

"Sure he didn't say anything, eh?"

"I gave you my answer awhile back, Captain," Bryden answered, sharply. "I don't know what happened to them yet."

Barlow pointed to a black book on his desk. "He had his log book with him. He ran a small schooner, the Tania. It seems the old fool was headed for Aklavic—just him and the girl, mind you! Well, he got pinched in the ice and had to abandon ship. Just like him, always trying to save a penny. The Lord knows what for, he never went outside to spend it!"

"Where did he winter?" Bryden asked.

"Damned if I know, he was cagey about that. Always came into Aklavic to pick up a crew. I thought he might have told you, Mister."

Bryden felt Barlow's eyes probing him and he flushed in spite of himself. He said: "Maybe he did, but I don't know Russian, Captain."

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"All right," Barlow dismissed him with a short laugh, "Leave the door open."

Swearing under his breath Bryden passed the girl's cabin and went into his own.

IT WAS midnight before he found an opportunity to talk with the girl. A fresh breeze had sprung up an hour before, dispelling the fog, and Cachalot was under full sail. The sun had just dipped below the southern horizon and a brief hour of darkness had settled on the sea. She came on deck so quietly that Bryden was not aware of her presence until he felt her hand upon his arm. Although the night was crisp her head was uncovered, exposing dark curls to the wind. Her face was pale showing lines of fatigue, and her eyes were moist, seeming to draw the starlight into them. Her gaze swept Bryden's tall, young figure from head to toe and a faint blush stole upward to her cheeks. She said:

"Mr. Ascot has told me that I owe you my life, Mr. Bryden. She spoke in a husky voice with a slight accent.

"Oh, don't mention it, Miss!" said Bryden, hastily. Uneasily he wondered just how much Ascot had told her. The girl was quick to note his embarrassment, and a faint approving smile parted her lips. Bryden took her arm and led her to the taffrail out of the helmsman's hearing.

"Where was the Captain when you came up?" he asked with a slight frown.

"That man——!" She broke off with a gesture of abhorrence that placed Barlow among things that crawl.

"Where did you meet him before?" he asked.

She shook her head; "I've never seen him before, but I hate him!" She turned her head away and looked astern where the whale boat bounced in the wake of the Cachalot. "You see," she went on, her voice strained, "I was born aboard my father's ship. He changed her name to Tania after me. That's unlucky, you know. It was for him. My mother went away with Captain Barlow when I was a year old. We never saw her again."

Bryden looked down on her bent head. Something deep within his nature stirred and suddenly he felt at ease in her presence.

He saw her as a woman that fate had thrown into his arms and knew that her delicate beauty was a priceless thing, a thing to fight for. His mind leaped back to Ivan Korvich's last whispered words and he pondered the mysterious weaving of the Fate that had brought him to die on Black Barlow's ship.

"Your father gave me a message before he died," he said, gently. "He spoke of a cabin on an island. Do you know of it?"

"Oh, yes! It is an island in Coronation Gulf, Dolphin Isle. It is my home. Father never went outside, we were on our way to——"

"I know," interposed Bryden, softly. "Is there anything of value on it?"

She gave him a puzzled look, "Of course, we have everything, even a silver tea service."

"That's not what I mean. There's something else. He was trying hard to tell be about it, but——" He broke off frowning as a shadow fell across the rail. He walked over to the binnacle.

"Who was that?" he asked the helmsman. The seaman blinked sleepy eyes at him.

"Didn't see anything, sir."

"Wake up!" growled Bryden. "You're off half a point." He went to the poop ladder and scanned the deck forward. Nothing moved but the shadow cast by the sails as the ship dipped her nose into liquid moonlight. Two bells sounded forward. An hour of the watch was gone. He went back to the girl.

"Better go below, Miss," he advised.

She gave him a quick look. "Was someone listening?"

"I think so."

At the companionway she paused and looked up into Bryden's face with a twinkle in her eyes. Said she: "I think you might call me Tania. Men who have seen much less of me have not thought it improper." She was gone before Bryden could answer.

He turned away and began to pace the poop with a half smile upon his lips. As

he passed the corner of the deckhouse he heard a sharp intake of breath, the swish of air—heard it and tried to turn.

The blow fell with a sickening thud, and fingers of light stabbed into his brain. His fur cap had acted as a pad so he did not lose consciousness completely. But the weight of his body was too great for his legs. He tried to cry out and clutched for support. Then he heard a grunt of exertion, the push of hands against his back hurled him across the deck.

He struck the rail and fell across it. He heard the pad of feet and struggled to rise, but there was no strength left in him. His legs were lifted. He caught a glimpse of Black Barlow's distorted face as he plunged downward, then salt water flooded his mouth and lungs.

III

HE CAME to the surface with an agonized scream for help. Instinctively he stroked in the wake of the Cachalot until the icy chill of the water brought him back to full consciousness. Treading water he watched the ship vanish into the night. It was useless to shout; useless to struggle. He was alone in the sea.

But the will to live was strong, it would not let him drown without a struggle. He took a deep breath and went under, loosening his boots and kicking them off. Then he turned over on his back, trying to think calmly.

The Cachalot had been two miles off shore when he had last checked her position, and there was an in-shore drift. It was not an impossible swim. But already he could feel the numbing cold of the water. He started to swim. He had not taken many strokes before a paralyzing cramp struck his right arm. He treaded water, fighting the panic that came with it. As he kneaded the bunched muscles of his arm a black object drifted across his line of vision. He stared at it incredulously, thinking that it was some trick of his imagination. But it did not vanish when he shook his head. The damned thing looked like a whale boat—it was, he could see the name Tania on

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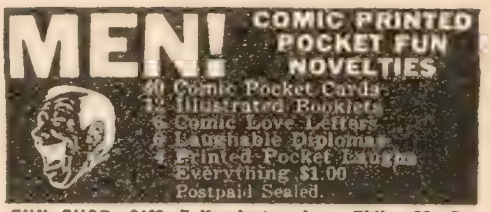

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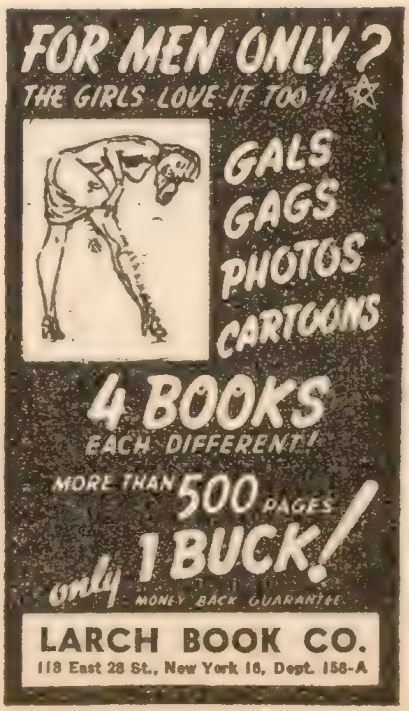

its bow! A cry broke from his lips, he turned on his back and kicked his way toward it.

He was not convinced that it was real until he had clutched the gunwale and heaved himself aboard. As soon as he had massaged the agony out of his arm he went to the locker under the stern sheets and broke it open. Everything was there, the regulation equipment and more —blankets and a chart that old Korvich must have stowed there when he abandoned ship. There was a little water in the breaker, but no food. Even the tin of ship's biscuit under the thwart was empty.

He stripped and towelled himself with cotton waste from the locker, his mind busy trying to account for the events of the night. Barlow had followed the girl on deck, he reasoned. He must have heard the girl name her father's island. Certainly, Barlow knew what was on it; and, now that he knew its position, it was equally certain that he would sail for it.

Wrapped in a blanket he scrambled over the thwarts to the bow of the whale boat and hauled in the tow line. It had been cut. He twisted the end of the rope in his hand with a crease of thought between his eyes. Of course, quick thinking and quick action on someone's part had saved his life. But who had done it? The helmsman? It was unlikely that the sleepy idiot knew what had happened yet.

Ascot may have followed Barlow as he'd done before. Tania? Yes, that was more likely. She must have come back on deck for some reason. She'd seen the whale boat towing astern. She'd think of it.

Anxiety for the girl made Bryden ungrateful. He hoped he was wrong. Whoever had cut that rope adrift must have witnessed Barlow's attempt to murder him. That spelled sudden death for the Unknown, unless he was smart enough to conceal his knowledge from Barlow.

As the sun came up Bryden saw that he had drifted to within a mile of rugged headland with the surf spume foaming at its base. He got the chart and unrolled it. Dolphin Isle was shown among a group of islets that peppered the entrance to Bathurst Inlet. He made quick calculations. It was no more than a two days' run to the island, but the gnawing emptiness in the pit of his stomach warned him that it was impossible without food or water.

He rolled up the chart and scowled at the barren, rocky coastline. Nothing but moss and lichen. Not enough to keep an Eskimo alive. He jumped up with a shout. He wasn't more than fifty miles from the Eskimo village at Coppermine River!

Half an hour later he had the whale boat's mast stepped and was scudding along the coast on the wings of a six-knot breeze. Again he pondered the mysterious workings of Destiny. He chuckled as the aptness of the Biblical phrase, "—— cast thy bread upon the waters——" occurred to him. Yes, it was damned queer, or it would be if there was enough of the blasted bacon left!

He reached the Eskimo village a few hours before nightfall. They had not forgotten him. He was greeted with shouts and smiles. They took him into one of their huts. It was half underground, built of stone, turf and bones. He traversed a narrow passage on all fours and came out into the interior. It was lighted with a basin-like lamp suspended from the roof, the flame of which, the wick being of moss, served as fire and light. The floor was filthy, a mass of blubber was heaped in the centre of it. There was no ventilation and the stench was awful.

A couple of wolfish-looking dogs snarled at him. Half asphyxiated, and with tears pouring from his smarting eyes, he made out the figure of an old woman with teeth worn down to her gums. She was seated on a sort of bench at one side of the hut. She could speak a little pidgin English, and, from the diffidence shown to her by the others, he supposed that she was the village sorceress.

SHE told him that he was a great man, enjoying the inelegant title of Belly-Filler. He gathered that his bacon had put new heart into the hunters. They had gone out in their umiaks and captured a white whale, all of which was due to the good luck he had brought to the village.

The old woman's voice crackled on, but more Eskimos were crowding into the hut. The heat became unbearable and nausea gripped Bryden. Throwing etiquette to the wind, he dived for the tunnel, crawled out and staggered to his feet gulping in the sweet, crisp air.

Later he traded some of the boat's equipment for food and an old Winchester rifle and a few rounds of ammunition. He was offered shelter for the night. But nothing could have persuaded him to enter the hut again. He sent the old woman a blanket as a gift to avoid giving offense and slept under the sail in the whale boat.

Three days later he was wandering among a maze of islands; some several acres in extent, rocky but covered with the pale green and lilac of caribou-moss and purple whortleberries; others were small, mere peaks of rock jutting up out of the sea, the nesting place of countless sea birds that wheeled and squawked over his head.

He had made a good course from the Coppermine River to the largest island of the group, and with that as a point of departure he had made for Dolphin Isle. But all the islets were not shown on the chart. There were openings between them that looked like channels but turned out to be inlets; and doubtless he had passed channels that looked like inlets. At last, aware that he had sailed around the compass, Bryden was forced to the humiliating admission that he was all adrift, as hopelessly lost as a landlubber.

He had just made up his mind to shape a course back to the big island, his starting point, and try again when the sharp crack of a rifle set him into squawking flight. The granite walls of the islets caught the report and tossed the echo to and fro like a ball of sound before he could localize it. But it had been loud and he knew that his goal was within a few hundred yards. That he might be the target for the hidden marksman did not occur to him before a second bullet struck the water a foot short of the tiller and went skipping and whining across the channel.

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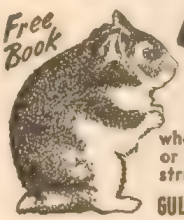

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the island a hundred yards astern. Bryden crouched down in the boat, thinking that there was one good thing about it, his navigation was vindicated. He pushed the tiller over and headed for an islet at the far end of the larger one. He soon gained the shelter of the rocks. He dropped the sail and sculled into a small cove.

He scrambled up the rocks to a high point where he had a good view of the channel. There was a gap of a few hundred yards between his rock and Dolphin Isle. The island itself was like a dozen others he'd passed, a hump of granite its high points whitened by guana. Green moss and scarlet arctus matted the flats and willows grew wherever enough soil had accumulated in sheltered depressions.

The bottomless sea lapped against the rock walls several feet below the high water line. There was no beach visible and Bryden concluded that the Cachalot must be anchored on the other side of the island, probably where old Korvich had his winter quarters.

Since someone had taken a shot at him, he reasoned that Black Barlow had posted a lookout and it was likely that the fellow would have binoculars. His chance of getting across to the island without being spotted were zero. He pondered the problem for a long time, then scrambled down to the boat with a grin of self-approval on his face.

For the next half hour he was busy, prying up the bottom boards of the whale boat and lashing them to the oars. When he had finished he had a make-shift raft with buoyancy enough to float his rifle and gear. Next he made a dummy of the blankets and sat it in the stern sheets of the whale boat. Then he hoisted the sail and lashed the tiller, so that the boat would sail away from the island, straight down the channel. He gauged the wind and trim of sail to a fine point, and when he shoved the boat off she sailed a true course like a toy yacht in a pond.

At fifty yards from where he stood the dummy looked convincing. A perfect decoy. Bryden nodded his satisfaction and sat down to wait. As he saw it, the lookout would report to Barlow, and Barlow would send out a boat in pursuit.

BUT when he could no longer see the white sail of the whale boat and the unmistakable chugging of the Cachalot's engine burst upon his ears suddenly, he jumped to his feet with a string of oaths. His first thought was that Black Barlow had found whatever he'd come for and was heading out to sea, leaving him marooned. Then, as the schooner passed his rock close in, his seaman's eye noted signs of hasty departure—an open hatch; the companion ladder still over the side, the unshipped anchors just clear of the water, which meant that Barlow was expecting to drop his hooks again before long. Bryden chuckled, his decoy had drawn big game!

As soon as it was safe, he stripped, bundled his gear and lashed it to the raft, He shoved it off, then flopped into the frigid water.

Pushing the raft ahead of him made it a long swim. Physical sensibility had left his body when he dragged himself up onto a shelf of rock. Barnacles tore his flesh but he was unaware of it until he saw the blood. Despite the exertion of scrambling down gullies and up over rocks, his teeth were still chattering when, from a high bluff, he looked down upon a land-locked cove.

Sheer granite cliffs rose from the sea enclosing and concealing a beach of coarse sand that sparkled with mica. The water within the narrow entrance was brown with kelp and in a state of absolute calm. Bryden had to scan every foot of the beach before he saw the cabin. It squatted in a large cleft in the rock wall and its sod roof, upon which the bright blossoms of the Arctic flourished, made it part of its background. A wisp of smoke rose from its chimney.

He slung his rifle and made his way around the bluff toward the rear of the cabin. He came upon the cleft where it narrowed into a shallow gulch. He slid down and followed it. As he rounded a spur of rock he heard some one splitting wood. He drew back quickly. As he did so the butt of his rifle struck the rock make a loud ringing sound. The ax strokes stopped. Mauchy's gruff voice challenged:

"Who's there? Show yerself. Lively now!"

Bryden flattened himself against the rock. There was a pause, then the crunch of boots on gravel approached him. The next moment Mauchy came around the spur. He carried a double-bladed ax in his brawny hands. The two men saw each other in the same instant. Mauchy pulled up short. For a moment he stood staring in bewilderment while his slow wits struggled to grasp the testimony of his eyes. Then he stepped forward, lifting his ax.

Bryden rushed him. His lowered shoulder struck the bo'sun full on the chest and bowled him over. But Mauchy managed to retain his hold on the ax; and, as he rolled over, he aimed a vicious swing at Bryden's legs. The blade glanced on a rock with flying sparks, and the haft was twisted from Mauchy's hand.

Sheath-knife in hand he jumped to his feet with oaths pouring from his mouth like bilge water. Bryden had got his rifle unswung but before he could work the lever, Mauchy lumbered toward him. Bryden side stepped and brought the muzzle of the rifle down across the other's head. Mauchy fell on his face and lay very still. Quickly Bryden took a piece of boat lacing from his pocket and lashed his hands behind his back. Then with his rifle at the ready he advanced upon the cabin.

It was a bark-roofed lean-to with no windows in it. The door stood open. He moved cautiously across to it and stood listening. Hearing nothing, he ventured inside. He passed through the kitchen and pushed open the door into the living-room with the muzzle of his rifle.

A woman's startled cry and a salty oath greeted him as the door swung open. Tania and Ascot stared at him in speechless amazement as he cautiously entered the room. He wondered why they did not move, then he saw that they could not. Both were seated on a couch, their legs shackled together with a length of chain which in turn was padlocked to the leg of the couch. The expression on Ascot's face was comical. Bryden grinned at him.

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"Anyone else around?" he asked in a whisper.

"That gorilla, Mauchy, blast him!"

"He won't bother us," said Bryden, walking over to the girl. She looked up into his face.

"You did see the whale boat!" she breathed. "I dared not hope——"

"So it was you!" said Bryden

She nodded and burst into excited speech: "I was standing in the companionway. I had left the doors open. As you turned away I saw Captain Barlow sneak from the deckhouse. At first I didn't know what to do. Then I thought I'd better warn you that he'd been listening in. When I came on deck I saw him hit you with a marlin-spike and push you to the rail. I knew that screaming wouldn't save you. He would not have stopped the ship. I thought of a life belt first, then of the whale boat. I cut her adrift and then started to scream. But he'd seen me. He hit me. When I came to I was locked in my cabin and——"

"He saw you!" gasped Bryden. "And you're still alive!"

"That's not hard to figure, son," Ascot's voice cut in. "He hasn't got what he's after yet. He thinks she knows and won't tell. Now, how the blazes did you ——"

"Hold it!" Bryden interposed with a grin. "I want a few answers first, Colin. For instance, what's Barlow got against you?"

IV

ASCOT SNORTED. "Plenty!" said he. "First, he got Mauchy to swear that he'd seen you fall overboard, but I wouldn't sign his statement in the log. Then, there's only Mauchy and a couple of others he can depend on. The rest of the gang for'ard don't like the smell of things. He knows that if I got a chance to talk to them he'd lose his blasted ship! That's why he lugged me up here out of harm's way. What I can't figure out is why he left here in such an all fired hurry. He's got something on his mind."

"He has," Bryden grinned. Briefly he told them what had happened. When he had finished Ascot slapped his thigh and laughed: "Lord, but I'd like to see his face when he overhauls that blasted dummy!"

"You'll see him soon enough," said Bryden with a scowl. "He'll be back. Meanwhile, I'll see what I can do about those irons. Mauchy should have the key."

He went outside. Mauchy was still out. There was a deep gash on his forehead where he struck it on a jagged piece of rock. It wanted attention. Bryden dragged him into the kitchen. He found a ring of keys in his pocket and went back to Ascot and the girl.

"We'll use these on Mauchy," he said as the irons dropped from their legs. Tania held open the door to one of the bedrooms while the two men carried the bo'sun inside. She produced a first aid kit, and while Ascot shackled the unconscious man to the bed Bryden dressed his head wound.

"Can I help?" the girl asked.

"If you've got some food—anything but bacon," Bryden suggested.

Ascot looked up quickly as the girl left the room. Said he: "We'll have to shoot it out when he comes back, son."

Bryden nodded, "We've got to get him and a boat when he comes ashore. We're marooned on this blasted island if we don't!"

"Aye," Ascot agreed. "Maybe it won't be so tough. There's only him and two of his pals now. As I told you, the others will stand off if they don't jump him."

"We'll soon know," said Bryden, grimly.

An hour later they sat over a meal in the living room. Bryden's attention was divided between the windows that overlooked the cove and the girl who smiled across the table. The effect was distracting. He shifted his chair until her head was framed in one of the windows where he could admire the curve of her shoulders and bosom, revealed by the square-cut bodice she wore, and watch for the Cachalot at the same time. The girl had been telling them of her life upon the island.

"The strange part is," she was saying, "that there is nothing more than you see

here that I know of. Captain Barlow will find nothing, and——"

"There must be something!" Bryden interposed. "Why would your father tell me of this island? Warn me against Barlow?"

"Perhaps because of me. Who knows? But just what did he say? You've never told me."

"There are a lot of things I haven't had time to tell you yet," said Bryden with a grin.

"Leave them till later," she answered with a provoking smile. "Now, what did my father say?"

"Oh, he said his heart wasn't strong, then he went off into Russian. After a while he rallied and said something about a 'mother-grave' or some Russian words that sounded like it. But since—well, your mother didn't die here. There's no grave——" He stopped speaking as the girl sprang to her feet.

"Oh, but there is—there is!" she cried. "But you said you'd never seen her again!" Bryden expostulated in bewilderment.

"That's true! You'd never guess—no one but me." She came to stand beside his chair, her hand resting on his shoulder. "You see," she explained, "father never told me what had actually happened. But when I was three years old he took me back of here and showed me a grave. He said it was mother's grave. For a long time I put flowers on it in the summer time. But when I started to sail with him and went to the grave no more he knew that others had told. We never spoke of her again."

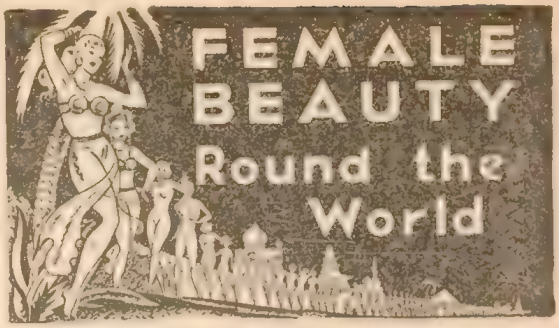
"Well, I'll be damned!" said Ascot.

THE GIRL ran across the room to one of the bedrooms. At the door she paused and looked at Bryden, her eyes shining with excitement. She said: "It is not too far. Come, I will show you!"

Bryden hesitated, looking out of the windows. Ascot picked up the rifle.

"All right, son," said he. "I'll keep the watch. If you hear a shot slip your cable and head back."

With a short-handled spade over his



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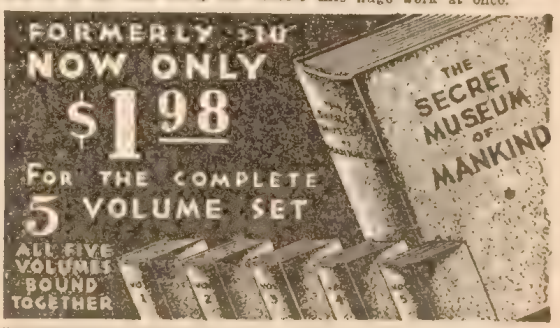

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shoulder Bryden followed the girl up a steep trail that wiggled up toward the center of the island. She led him into a deep, bowl-like depression carpeted with lichens that flamed orange, silver, green and gold. There was a pond fringed with willows, a miniature lake and trees like the work of a Japanese painter. All that remained of the grave was a rough cairn of stones among the willows close to the edge of the pond.

It was but the work of a moment to heave the stones aside and Bryden's spade was soon turning over the sandy top soil. He was only down a foot when his spade rang on metal. Quickly he uncovered an iron-bound chest. It was not large but it took all his strength to haul it out of the hole. The lid was fastened down by heavy, steel tongues and padlocks.

"Open it! Open it!" cried the girl.

Bryden laughed. Said he: "It will take a hacksaw or a stick of dynamite to do that!" He bent over the chest to examine the padlocks but straightened up with a gasp as the girl's scream pierced his ear drums. He heard the smack of a blow and whirled around to see Tania collapse at Black Barlow's feet. He took a pace forward, his foot struck the spade and he stopped as the muzzle of Barlow's rifle swung in line with his chest.

Their eyes met and each held the gaze of the other.

"You're smart, Mister. I've got to admit that dummy was good. I'm surprised that you didn't guess that I'd stand off this rock and come ashore in a boat."

Bryden swore under his breath. He should have thought of it.

Barlow's eyes glazed over, their pupils contracting. "All right," he said, softly. "Just turn your back. It will be all over in a split second."

"Go to hell!" Bryden kicked and flung himself sideways at the same time. The rifle exploded a moment before the spade struck Barlow. But the suddenness of the move dazed him. He had pulled the trigger without lowering the muzzle of his rifle. Bryden crashed into him, forcing the rifle back against his chest.

They stood to to toe, their white-lipped faces a foot apart. The rifle was between them, each gripping it with both of his hands, striving to twist it from the other's grasp. For a time the rifle was level between them as their arm and shoulder muscles quivered with the strain put upon them. Then it began to tilt slowly. Purple veins came to stand out on Barlow's forehead, his face was contorted with exertion. A thin smile came to Bryden's lips as he looked into the other's eyes, now widening with fear.

SUDDENLY Barlow released his hold upon the rifle and Bryden's right arm flew up. Barlow caught him off balance and landed a smashing blow. Bryden fell heavily. He still held the rifle in one hand, and as he struck the ground the butt swung around and struck him on the side of his head. The pond and willows whirled around him, then the blurred, distorted face of Black Barlow rushed upon him.

He had the presence of mind to roll over on top of the rifle. Then Barlow caught one of his arms, grunting as he forced it up behind his back. The pain cleared Bryden's head. Barlow was trying to drag the rifle from under him with his free hand. Bryden caught his little finger. Barlow yelped with pain as he snapped it like a match stick. Bryden kicked him off and leaped to his feet.

Both men forgot about the rifle, all was forgotten but the primitive hate that nerves the unaided hand to maim and kill. They came together exchanging blows that thudded and drew spurts of blood. Then they clinched, crashed to the ground and rolled over and over. Barlow jolted his knee into Bryden's groin. As Bryden lay writhing in agony, Barlow staggered to his feet, his blood-shot eyes darting around, looking for a weapon.

Then, as Bryden struggled to his knees, he stooped suddenly, picked up one of the huge boulders from the grave and heaved it above his head. With a hoarse cry Bryden threw his arms about Barlow's legs and jerked his feet from under him. Then he blacked out.

When he came to Ascot and Tania were bending over him. They had carried him up onto a mossy bank at some

distance from the pond. He struggled to a sitting position, looking around him with dazed eyes.

"Where is he?" he demanded.

The girl shuddered and looked away. Ascot spat and squinted at him. Said he: "He isn't pretty to look at, son. It seems that rock fell on his head."

"That's the way it was," Ascot told him. "Now look son, the Cachalot is at anchor in the cove, and there's a delegation from the crew waiting at the cabin. As I told you, the gang for'ard figure that Barlow's all foul of the law. They don't know what it's all about and they don't want any part of it. Just as soon as Barlow went ashore and they heard shooting, they jumped the other two. They came looking for me to show them the way home."

"Well," said Bryden as they helped him to his feet, "We'll go down and give it to them straight."

"Sure," agreed Ascot, "I told them that you'd take command and run for Aklavic."

That night when the Cachalot was bowling along close hauled to the wind and with the open waters of the Gulf foaming at the bow, in the saloon Tania and Bryden opened Ivan Korvich's sea chest. In it was his last will and testament, plus a small fortune in gold dust neatly sewn in caribou-skin bags.

"You're a rich young woman now," said Bryden, with a slight frown.

"Yes," said the girl absently, her eyes fixed on Bryden's face. She moved closer to him; then, after a pause: "They say the dying see into the future. It is strange that my father put so much trust in you. I think he must have foreseen——" She broke off giving Bryden a sidelong look.

"Well, what?" prompted Bryden.

She pouted and shrugged: "Oh, that I would need help, and advice. What do you advise, Mr. Bryden?"

Bryden grinned: "I'm biased," said he. "I can only tell you what I want." He took her in his arms. Her body yielded sweetly to his embrace. Her fingers twined in his hair drawing his lips down to hers.

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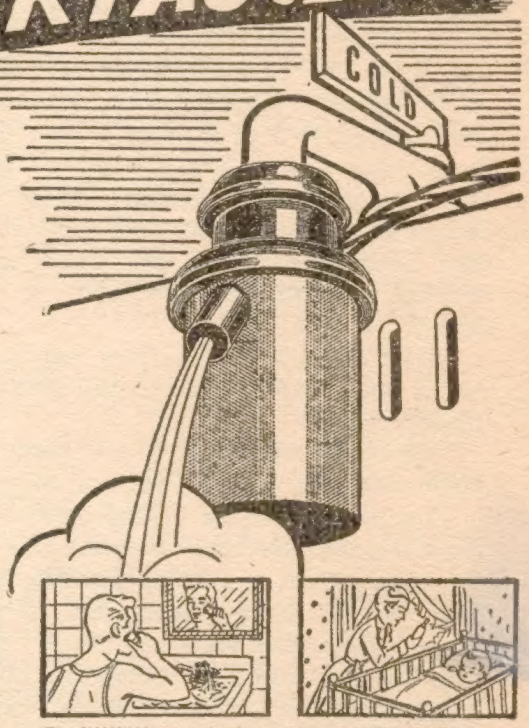

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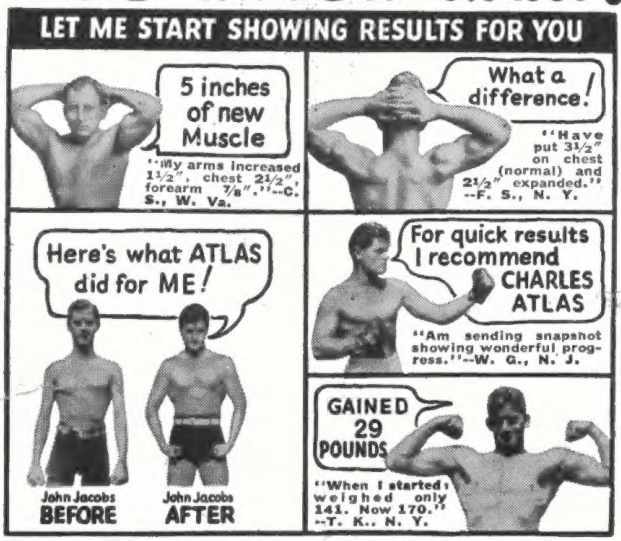
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